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VOICES IN THE STRUGGLE
- THE SOURCE OF HOPE IN A METHODOLOGY
OF FEMINIST LIBERATIVE ETHICS

Faye Wakeling

A Thesis in the Department of Religion

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Voices in the Struggle - The Source of Hope in a Methodology of Feminist Liberative Ethics

Faye Wakeling, Ph.D.
Concordia University, 1997

This thesis project involved two inter-related activities. The first activity was the collective writing of a work, "Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action", by five women, each deeply involved in an impoverished community. They wrote of the sources of hope in their years of engagement for social transformation. Four women were long-time residents of Point St. Charles, one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in Montreal. They know poverty first-hand and have been involved in different groups working for social change in the community. The author of the thesis has been engaged in community work over the past 14 years at Saint Columba House, an Outreach Ministry of the United Church. She initiated a process of discussion and collective writing about the forces that shape such a community and about the power structures from within and without that effect the struggles for social change. They have written about the place of women in this community and the factors that encourage victims of poverty to become empowered as agents of change. Together the five women reveal a new understanding of the meaning of hope in the midst of struggle. They were able to do so through dialogue and story telling about their daily lives, wrestling with ethical dilemmas they face and biblical critique from the underside. This work is

included in its entirety in the thesis.

The second part consists of reflections and analyses of this initial collective writing. The thesis discusses ways in which this group engaged in collective reflections, which are in themselves liberative. It suggests new insights into the meaning of hope as integral to a methodology of "feminist liberative ethics". It focuses on the intersecting and circular processes of liberation, reflection and action in a lived community experience. From the starting point of the context of engagement in the struggle against oppression, new principles are introduced for a methodology that requires the participation of a community in all aspects of ethical and theological reflection on their own situation. Such a methodology arises from the conviction that ethics must be an active, engaged, process which requires the involvement of those whose lives are being analyzed. This necessitates an epistemological shift in the approach of the academia engaged in liberative ethics and suggests a new role for the theological ethicist in such a method.

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The people of Point St. Charles, who have such a long history of struggle for social rights and dignity, have formed and challenged me, both personally and in the writing of this thesis. I am deeply grateful to their witness and to all those at St. Columba House, whose work is such a vital part of my reflections.

I am very grateful for the support and challenge of so many people in the academia who have helped me over the years to move from the initial conception of this rather unorthodox process to the completion of the thesis. I would particularly like to express my deep appreciation to my thesis committee: to Fred Bird, my thesis director, whose questions arising from his own rich experience in the field of ethics have challenged me to articulate and clarify my thinking, and for his willingness to support an unconventional thesis; to Norma Joseph who has opened my eyes to new understandings through feminist judaism and encouraged me along

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I am deeply indebted to my partner, Pierre Goldberger, for being a sounding board to test and debate new ideas, for his theological insight and deep commitment to justice, for his faithful support and profound understanding of the significance of the voices in the struggle being heard.

VOICES IN THE STRUGGLE

- THE SOURCE OF HOPE IN A METHODOLOGY OF FEMINIST LIBERATIVE ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION

My people.....will build houses and get to live in them -they will not be used by someone else. They will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine - it will not be drunk by others. Like trees, my people will live long lives. They will fully enjoy the things that they have worked for.....and their children will not meet with disaster.

Isaiah 65: 21-23

For a community to hold onto a vision of what life should be, in the midst of increasing poverty, loss of jobs and no promise for a future for their children, is a daunting challenge. When this community perseveres in working for social transformation, refusing to be silenced and demanding their rights for the sake of the future generation, there is hope.

This thesis will present a study of those elements that foster and encourage social transformation in an inner-city community that has lived with long-term poverty. Of particular concern will be a study of the forces and systems that mould and shape such a community, the power structures from within and without that effect the struggle for social change, the place of women in this community and the factors that encourage victims of poverty to become empowered as agents of change.

This search to understand what sustains the community and to discern the ethical and theological questions that are raised out of this experience, is the work of those who live in the situation. The method employed must itself be liberative for those who are themselves actively engaged in the struggle for social transformation in their community.

Thus methodology becomes a critical focus as I seek to discern what principles undergird a method that respects the experience of those studied, gives them the tools and the authority to engage in ethical/theological reflection, and engages them in a process that will strengthen their social engagements. Questions of accountability to a community and the academia in such a venture are complex and will be addressed.

I bring to this project my own engagements and studies as a feminist, a socialist, an ethicist and a theologian. From this socialist feminist Christian perspective I recognize that the struggles for hope and dignity in an impoverished community are inextricably related to (1) the socio-economic analysis of a "Third World" community within the "First World", (2) a feminist analysis that explores the patriarchal power structures that affect both the inter-personal and public place of women within society, and (3) the importance of developing a liberative theology that arises out of the lived experience of this community in its struggle to be faithful.

I have worked in the community of Point St. Charles for the past 14 years and am continually struck by the courage, strength and wisdom of the women. They are the experts on poverty, survival and taking risks. Their understanding comes out of their lived experience, their need to analyze and confront the forces that work against them and to find the sources of power within the community that can be mobilized. Their work is concrete and goal-oriented, but there has been an increasing interest over the years in understanding and articulating the means by which changes and empowerment have come about.

Women have been selected to participate in this project for two reasons. First, in our community as in many others, it is predominately women who are involved in people's movements and organizations to work for social change. Second, this study, work and analysis comes out of a feminist perspective, an intention to develop a feminist methodology and to explore the significance of gender on socio-economic conditions.

It is of fundamental importance that the voices of women who know poverty and oppression, be heard. The articulation of their praxis has been a further source of empowerment as they learn to reflect on their history, experiences and vision. It is also vital, in furthering our understanding in the field of social ethics, to have input from those who usually remain voiceless in our society.

The core of the thesis, Part I, is a book¹ that has been written by myself and four women who know poverty, who are residents of Point St. Charles, deeply committed and engaged in the work of social transformation, representative of four different groups who are working for social change and willing to be challenged to further understand and articulate the significance of such engagement. In my ministry at St. Columba House, an Outreach Mission of the United Church of Canada in Point St. Charles, I have worked with these women for many years to find ways to meet the desperate needs of those in our community through education, discussion, protests and work co-operatives. Our book is included in my thesis in its entirety, in order to respect the integrity of the work as a whole.

Chapter I explores the centrality of hope in the struggle, as identified by the women of the collective, through their own life experiences and their engagement in the work of social transformation in their community. This continued to be a theme that focused our ongoing reflections on the community, the meaning of work, connections with global partners and the process of transformation.

The sense of pride and community spirit that is so powerful in Point St. Charles is explored in Chapter II. This community is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Montreal,

¹ St. Columba House Women's Collective, Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action, United Church Publishing House, Etobicoke, 1996.

with high unemployment, low education levels, high numbers of single-parent families and enormous energy required for survival. It is an increasingly secularized community in our post-Christendom times, but there remains a strong popular theology that looks to the church for the rituals of the rite of passage (with elaborate family celebrations of baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage and funerals). The collective, who come from diverse religious backgrounds, explore the role of the church, the significance of the community's long history of engagement in social action and the marginalization of working-class people from the mainstream of society.

In the third chapter, the focus on three specific groups enables the exploration of their role within the community, the motivation of those involved in the work, the analysis of the forces that work for or against their goals and whether such groups are a source of hope for the ongoing involvement in social transformation.

The fourth chapter reflects on the experience of the Worship Group in developing a liberative theology that arises out of their context and brings new understanding to their ongoing engagements. The christological shift that came through the making of a banner, has been a watershed that has named the experience of the community's struggle for justice as the cross itself. The method that has been employed over the years in doing theological reflection, provided the base

for writing a collective book and the development of a method of feminist liberative ethics.

The question of the meaning of work is addressed in Chapter Five. Outside readings and the working-class values derived from their own families are examined in an attempt to clarify to what extent work can be a source or destroyer of hope.

In the sixth chapter, there is an exploration of the power of an experience with another culture to heighten a community's self-perception, to bring awareness of the global impact on local issues and to be a source of hope in the ongoing work. Through the visit to Mexico, the women speak of their eyes being opened to class issues, racism and systemic exploitation.

The final chapter is a discussion of the sources of hope that lead to social transformation, as experienced by the women in their work and the community's actions for social change. The role of work when it brings dignity, the experience of empowerment that comes from collective sharing and action, the change that comes through education and the hope that comes through persistent resistance, are seen as seeds of transformation. The collective writing process itself was seen as a transformative experience that has opened up new horizons for ongoing work and validates this as a liberative method.

Part II of the thesis is a reflection on the writing of this book as a method of "Feminist Liberative Ethics", the integral place of hope in the process of social transformation and new insights from this experience for a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

The first chapter reflects on the methodological questions raised from the literature in the fields of liberation theologies, feminist theory, sociology and ethics, as they pertain to liberative ethics. The insights and challenges that these writings raise for the method I have engaged in are discussed. The arguments for engagement as the starting point for any liberative methodology and the difficulties or dangers of appropriation that so often occur in research, point to the need for developing new methods that involve community participants in all steps of ethical reflection. This involves particular challenges to the academia in seeking new ways to bridge the gap that exists between the everyday world and intellectual discourse.

The second chapter describes the method of liberative ethics that was employed in the collective writing of the book "Hope in the Struggle", arising out of the context of long-term engagement. Four steps or moments of transformation are identified that can offer new insights for a liberative methodology:

- 1) Seeing their own words in print was liberative
- 2) Reading other feminist literature was liberative as it

validated their own work and expanded horizons

3) Encounter with another culture was liberative

4) The collective writing project was transformative

In Chapter Three an analysis of the role of the ethicist in this process is discussed, with particular attention to issues such as accountability, solidarity, power dynamics, risk involved and the multiplicity of roles with the potential for conflict. Accountability to both the community and the academia produces a tension that must be resolved. A liberative ethics methodology challenges the academia to explore how it may break down barriers that exclude the hearing of voices of marginalized women and prevent direct involvement of people in the everyday world in the formulation of theories about their lives.

Chapter Four addresses the reason that hope was selected as the theme of the book written by the Women's Collective, their understanding of hope that came through reflection on their experience, hope as the source of the energy that helps people to persevere in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the hope that arises from the very process of reflection and articulation. This analysis lays the groundwork for positing the centrality of hope in a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

The steps of transformation that have been previously identified are analyzed in Chapter Five in order to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of transformation that

occurred through various steps. In spite of the powerful sense of accomplishment, tapping the source of the hope that continues to sustain them and the new opportunities that beckon, there have been costs to the women involved in relationship to their families and the community.

Questions raised from the literature in the first chapter are addressed in order to discern whether the method has met the challenges to encourage resistance and liberation; led to a transformation of social relations; provided opportunities for new understanding between classes and other communities.

From this analysis, new principles for a methodology of feminist liberative ethics are proposed. The thesis offers a method of engaging in collective ethical reflection that is in itself a liberative work of women from an impoverished community engaged in the work of social transformation. There are new insights into the meaning of hope as integral to a methodology of "feminist liberative ethics" and an innovative role for the theological ethicist engaged in such a method.

PART I

HOPE IS THE STRUGGLE

-a Community in Action

The WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE of Saint Columba House

Melissa Chamberlain, Elizabeth Garbish, Donna Leduc

Myrna Rose, Faye Wakeling

INTRODUCTION

We are a group of five women who have worked collectively over the past two years to talk and to write about our years of struggle in our community. How we got involved and what keeps us going are the main threads running through our reflections.

Four of us are women who know (or have known) poverty first-hand. Myrna, Donna, Elizabeth and Melissa are long-time residents of Point St. Charles and have been involved in four different groups who are working for social change in our community. Faye has been involved in all of these groups in her work in the community over the past 12 years at Saint Columba House, an Outreach Ministry of the United Church of Canada. She brought us together to discuss and write about our experiences.

The community of Point St. Charles is one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in Montreal, with high unemployment, poor education, high numbers of single-parent families and enormous energy required for survival. There is a very strong community spirit in "the Point", as we all call it, and a long history of organizing together to combat the conditions of poverty that have always been here. People still look to the church for special family celebrations of baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage and funerals, but like the rest of Quebec, the church no longer plays a

strong role in their daily lives. But there is a deep faith and commitment that lies just below the surface, and as women of different Christian denominations, we are trying to relate how such faith is related to our day to day struggles. So we are looking for new language to speak about hope, our visions and our experience of how God is with our people.

In our discussions together we are trying to understand how change takes place, in ourselves personally and in our community. As poverty deepens and despair mounts, we are aware how important it is to analyse and confront the forces that work against us. Out of our experience in community organizations we have tried to understand and speak about the means by which change and empowerment happen. We have also looked at what we can learn from other people's writings and other communities involved in similar struggles.

We are all women in this writing collective for a number of reasons. First, in our community as in many others, it is primarily women who are involved in people's movements and organizations to work for social change. Women and children are the primary victims of poverty and we want to understand the significance of gender on socio-economic conditions. Out of our experience as women we are developing new ways of working together and writing this book is an important experience in itself.

So we bring our different gifts, knowledge and experience together, to speak of the "sources of hope" and the "work for

social justice". We have recorded countless hours of discussions, have decided together what is important to put in our book and have reworked each section together. We have had sessions with people in the groups we work with and they have had input in the final write-up of work they are involved in. Our intent has been to produce something of value for ourselves and our community that expresses what has empowered us in our work, what obstacles have been overcome or remain, and the source of hope that keeps us going. We hope that our writing will be a way of sharing with other impoverished communities who are kindred spirits in the struggle. We also wish to communicate with those whose life experience has been very different, a sense of the strength, challenge and powerful spirit of a community that works together.

THE WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE

Melissa Chamberlain is a vivacious mother of 4 young children whose experience of welfare and her life-long history in community work has given her a broad understanding of our community needs. She works in the "Point At Work" women's co-operative, is a member of the Women's Discussion Group, co-ordinator of the Women Against Contamination committee and has been a participant in the Worship Group. She is the daughter of another collective member, Myrna Rose. We can always count on her to tell it like it is.

Elizabeth Garbish is the backbone of the Point Adult Centre for Education. She also works as a Teacher's Aid, tutors in the After-School Program and participates in the Worship Group. She still finds priority time for her husband and 4 children, aged 14 to 22 years, who live at home. The move from work as an office cleaner to community education has sent her life in new and exciting directions.

Donna Leduc's wonderful, joyous laugh is known throughout the community. She is married, a mother of 3 children and grew up in Point St. Charles. She works in the "Point At Work" women's co-operative and tutors in the After-School Program. She

somehow still finds time to volunteer as a committee member of the Point Adult Centre for Education and participates in the Women's Discussion Group and weekly worship at Saint Columba House. Working in the co-operative has been an escape for her from the hard experience of being unemployed and on welfare.

Myrna Rose finds each day a challenge and a joy in her work as Co-ordinator of the "Hand in Hand" Program for intellectually handicapped adults. She is the mother of 5 grown children and has known the humiliation of 15 years as a single parent on welfare. Over the years she has found new strength through her involvement as co-animator of the Women's Discussion Group, participant in the Worship Group and a member of the Point Adult Centre for Education committee.

Faye Wakeling's persistence and energy is what keeps us all going. She works directly with the Women's Discussion group, the women's upholstery co-operative, the Adult Education Centre, community coalitions and the weekly biblical reflections of the Worship Group and has been deeply affected by her involvement in the community. She is a United Church minister, Director of Saint Columba House and is also engaged in solidarity work for socio-economic justice in the church at large and in society. She is a wife and mother of 3 grown children and 2 step-children.

CHAPTER ONE

HOPE - What's in a word?

Out of the long, thoughtful silence, the response comes; "Hope is a big word."

When we first discussed the possibility of writing a book together, Faye explained how important she felt our work was and that we had much to say about the problems that we faced and our hopes for the community. We had often remarked that we should jot down an important insight or write an article about the work we do, but writing a book had never occurred to us. In our first working session together, we discussed what was important for us to write about as we look over the years of engagement and commitment. Faye suggested that for her, the question of hope, how people struggle, how they have hung in year after year, is really important to talk about and learn from, but that may not be what others felt.

Melissa's response was very powerful and profound. She said that no matter what the most important thing is for each one of us, "It is always hope that keeps you going. So hope is the good word". These words were not said lightly and the following discussion had a weight and significance that surprised us all.

Myrna said; "I think of hope as the support and strength we get from each other. I don't think that hope is just H-O-P-E, hope - a little word like that".

Then Melissa replied; "But you know it feels like it is right here, that you can touch it. But it's actually not. It is something very far away. But if it didn't feel so close, we wouldn't have it."

This became an important focus for us, in trying to describe or understand the contradictory nature of hope, as something that is so present and the very core of what keeps us going, while at the same time being "out there", elusive and beyond. As Elizabeth spoke of her understanding of hope in the context of her work with the Point Adult Centre for Education (P.A.C.E.), she said; "Even when you get hope, it's like its moving away! (this was met with a chorus of agreement) It's like P.A.C.E., for instance. We finally have the centre established and its running quite smoothly, but I want more. I'm sure it could be better. It's hope, but it's also like you're hoping you can get a little more out of it and give more to the people. The needs are so great and you know you'll never fulfil all the needs. But its not greed, its hope." Everyone is nodding in agreement and caught up in that sense of hope that pushes us on and does not allow us to be satisfied to stay where we are.

Myrna added; "You get really excited that you are going to reach this hope, whatever it is. You just go to grab it and, it is not that it jumps away, it is like it moves away just a little inch and you just can't get it!"

Melissa nodded in agreement and went on to say; "Let's

say we accomplish something. But it is like Elizabeth said, you want more. So now it has gone a little bit further and you have to work that little bit harder now to reach it again. Or it's bigger - it is big. It's a big thing. It is not a little thing, hope."

There is a quietness that surrounds these last words, as everyone reflects on the enormity and importance of what we are discussing.

Faye says; "I am surprised the hope is 'out there', because what I see you doing is so concrete, such as succeeding in organizing a new course for P.A.C.E, helping someone to make a breakthrough in learning, getting a good piece of furniture out that you are proud of...."

Myrna agrees but goes on to explain; "Let's say today I want to accomplish whatever and I do it. But it is never enough and the hope is still out there. I'm going to reach this goal, but all of a sudden I see a speck more that I could do, so the hope goes on. It feels like it is in me and then comes out, but never goes away."

At our next session, Myrna spoke of how significant our discussion had been for her in the intervening days as she continued to think through the implications for her and her work. She stated that even though we had talked of hope many times over the years, particularly in the Worship Group, this discussion had a much greater impact. "For a small word, it sure means a lot. Hope is only 4 letters and look at the big

meaning. As much as we talk about the hope and what it means for one another, it was reading over our own words in print that made it that much stronger."

It is as though hope is what calls people out, perhaps gives encouragement with the accomplishments along the way, but then opens up new horizons or challenges. Hope is in what you are doing, but beyond. We began to understand that it is not hope "out there" in the sense of being an abstract ideal, or something unattainable, but the tough nature of hope that is both in the struggle itself and the hard, ongoing work one is called to. Melissa expressed this in saying, "I find it is work. It's a struggle all the time. That is why I say it's out there. It's work, work, work."

Out of this sense of hope being the struggle itself came the question of how we identify or see this hope. Faye asked whether the sense of always searching to go further than we are, can mean that we don't always see the hope in what we are doing.

Donna stated that; "When you are inside, you don't see it. It is when you are outside the situation, looking in, that you can see something that gives you hope."

All of us had been together on a two-week education trip in Mexico last year (see Chapter 6) and had visited many community groups doing development work in very hard conditions. We discussed how we had returned with such a lift and an awareness of the hope that we saw in their struggle.

But Melissa reminded us that some of the groups we met with had seen some of that hope in our work and that surprised us. "I could see it in their eyes that they were hoping they would get as strong as us. But they accomplished and did much more than we ever did as a group and I was embarrassed about that. They have struggled and struggled. If they set out to do something, they did it. Whereas sometimes in our Women's Group we just like to hear ourselves talk. This year we got a little bit better, but we've got a long way to go to get to their standards. Their life is a struggle for everything they do.! But we didn't go to compare. We went to learn."

It is striking that in discussions of our work here we feel how heavy the work is and that it is a constant struggle. We found that the work of other groups engaged in struggle can be a source of hope.

We thought about how we had found hope in our lives and work, as we looked way back to those special times in our lives when someone or a group had helped us to see new possibilities. Our stories have the seeds of hope within them.

Myrna's Story

"We talk about a helping hand and I have often talked about the helping hand I have got over the years. But I never dreamed or thought of it as hope. But I think that lots of times, that is what it was when people encouraged me to do

something. When someone tells you that you can do something then maybe you think that you should try it, for whatever reason. But at the time you don't sit down and think of it as hope.

One of those times for me was encouraging me to work at Saint Columba House. Kay Wallace was the Cook and she asked me to help out with the Lunch Program. I didn't think I had time and I had too many kids of my own to look after, but she really encouraged me. I was at Saint Columba House because I had been bringing my son Randy to the Head Start program. You know, I never thought about it like that, but there was more to me than just coming with the kids to the school. She saw more in me than I knew I had myself.

"I always credit Saint Columba House with the helping hand I got, but over the years there are some special people we have to thank along the way. I guess it goes back to the poem of the Footsteps in the Sand.² You know you can't do

² "Footsteps in the Sand"

One night I had a dream. I was walking along the beach with the Lord and across the skies flashed a scene from my life. In each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand and to my surprise I noticed that many times along the path of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I noticed that it was at the lowest and saddest times in my life. I asked the Lord about it... .. Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way. But I notice that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why you left my side when I needed you most. The Lord said; "My child, I never left you. During your times of trial where you see only one set of footprints, I was carrying you."
Fishback Powers, Margaret, Footprints, Harper Collins, Toronto, 1993.

it by yourself. I hoped that I wouldn't always be in the rut that I was in and that I would have a better life. But I would never have done it by myself and I'm so thankful.

"I think that it was need that made me finally respond to the encouragement. When I say the need, I don't mean so much financial need, but the need to do something besides just being at home with children. It was another year before I was really on my own. Not having even enough to eat or to survive was a very hard situation at that time. It wasn't really a job at first. I just started to help around the kitchen at Saint Columba, setting up the tables for the children to come in for lunch. I think it was the encouragement that Kay saw something in me I didn't see and that there should be more to my life. All I did before was take the children to school and then go back home. I didn't have friends, I didn't go to the grocery store, I didn't do anything.

"It was another 5 years before I got a job. I had been helping out in the kitchen and when one of the women workers left, I was offered her job. But it took a lot of encouragement and a lot of help from people to take it on. You know, you just didn't go in and do that. I never dreamed I could do it. I got married very young, at 17, so that I didn't have much time to do too much, not even to have friends. When you stay home for years, you really believe that you can't do anything else.

"As time went by I was given the job as Cook for the School Lunch program. I couldn't believe that I could be in charge of feeding about 150 children a day. You never know what you can do until you try. With help and encouragement and a lot of hard work, this job worked out very well.

"Then one day I was asked if I would like to start up a new program for intellectually handicapped adults in our community at Saint Columba House. Again came the doubt - I can't do that! Now, looking back, I can't help thinking of Moses and so many others who felt they couldn't respond to something they were asked to do. But support came from others and because there was such a great need for that kind of program we found a way to start it. Now, fifteen years later, I often wonder how we ever did without it. The people who come to this program are so loving and giving. They have so much faith. It is a shared work of doing what God wants from each of us in love, faith and hope. Never a day goes by that I am not reminded of this great gift that has been given to me."

Elizabeth's Story

"You lose your identity when you stay home. I was 18 when I got married. I was very young, too young and I think that if I had it to do over, I would have waited a few years if I knew what I know now. I was very quiet then and everyone else told me what I was going to do.

"I experienced a lot of what Myrna talked about as a child. I grew up in a divorced family and that happened when I was three. My Mom remarried, but it was to an alcoholic. So there was a lot of struggle for the kids as well as for my Mom. I hoped that I would never, ever get involved with someone who drank like that and mistreated us.

"I moved to the Point when Jason, my youngest, was 3 months old. I was quiet and I didn't know anyone either. I just took the kids to school, came home, fed them. I didn't have any friends. I was very quiet and shy, with no confidence in myself. Actually the first step was when I put Jason in the Alternate School at Saint Columba House. You had to take your turn to be the parent in the classroom for one day a month with the teacher. I thought to myself, 'How am I ever going to do that? I won't even talk to the teacher. I'm too scared to be in the classroom.' I thought I didn't know how to handle children, even though I had my own and these were other people's children. I did go, but I was very shy and I did what I had to do.

"When Jason went on to Lorne School, there was only one day a year the parent had to be there in the classroom. I kind of enjoyed myself and I really liked that environment. The amazing thing is that the Kindergarten teacher said to me, 'You know, some day you are going to be a Teacher Aid'. She said that to me way before I ever thought of it.

"I initially started to get involved through the parent

School Committee. I believe it was the Principal that asked me to be on the Parent's Committee. I said I had never done anything like that before and I didn't really think I should do it. I told him straight out that I couldn't talk in front of people. He said I just had to listen. That was where it first started, but I had been volunteering before that in the school. I think I just wanted to get out of the house.

"I got more involved in the Parent's Committee at Lorne School because I wanted the school to stay open. I lived just around the corner and I hated the thought of the kids going to school on a bus. That was the first thing that started me off.....It was practical reasons at first, but not afterwards. I still didn't have a lot of confidence in myself.

"When I think of how I got involved in P.A.C.E., I realize that it didn't happen all of a sudden. In the beginning a lot of us were involved, but that wasn't like me to take part. We had meetings at Saint Columba House and divided into groups that worked on Alternative Education in Lorne School and Adult Education. I got involved in the Adult Education committee and we ended up going door-to-door in the Point to find out whether people were interested in adult education.

"Maybe it was just that I was always there at P.A.C.E. In the beginning, when we started the centre, I was a volunteer in the school a lot too. I was working at night at the same time. I just automatically went up and put the

coffee on and got things set up. But that wasn't like me. So why did I do it?"

There are some similarities in Myrna's and Elizabeth's stories. They both needed to get out of the house and somebody else gave a push. Somebody else made the point of saying that they could do something. The people who recognized those special skills also went ahead and made sure that they told Myrna and Elizabeth about their potential. We realized how important it is for us to remember what an effect that can have. Often we need a real push from other people to get going.

Elizabeth recalled how much pushing she needed to stand up before the public meeting of the School Board to present the proposal for keeping the elementary school open and starting an Adult Education Centre. She reminded Faye of the first time she asked her to speak and she said, "I kept telling you I couldn't do it and I knew I couldn't. I was very nervous and you kept saying, 'Sure you can', I remember those words - 'sure you can!' So that helped too, a lot. The first time I was so nervous I didn't even know what I said. I didn't feel I was that good, but everyone else kept saying I had done a good job."

Faye responded; "What was so strong about how you did it, was that it was clear that it wasn't easy for you. People could see how much it took for you to do it and how much it

meant. It wasn't just somebody standing up and saying words that came easy or words that somebody else had prepared. That made such a difference."

She had done a wonderful job and had a very powerful impact. She brought hope to people who saw that they could fight together for the education they needed.

Donna's Story

"When my children were at the Alternate School I loved being involved. I always wanted to be a teacher. When the children started going to public school, then I got involved in the Women's Discussion Group. I was very quiet. I was terrified to do anything. You used to tell me - 'Make up your own mind, do what you want, make your own decisions.' I never decided anything without discussing it with my husband Fred. Then when I started going to the Women's Discussion Group, he would say - "those women over there!"

"I got involved with the School Committee the last year Lorne School was open. I came to one of the meetings partly out of curiosity and I saw that it was just women like me, concerned about their kids having a school. But for me it was a bit different, because I went to that school and now my kids were going there. That was my heritage. I didn't want to see my heritage go. To see it go really hurt and I think that's one of the reasons that kept me going.

"I had always hoped to be a teacher and I have very fond

memories of my Grade 10 teacher. She was the one that said I could write. Although I have never pursued it, I do love to write. There was an incident that had a strong impact on me. The teacher had started up a library and someone broke into the library and vandalized the whole thing. She was so upset. She had really put her heart into it. I found her one day in the classroom bawling her eyes out and I was alone with her. I just rocked her and held her and hugged her until she felt a bit better. She wrote me a little note and I still have it to this day. She said that her bubble was burst and I gave her hope that day to carry on.

"I remember the first day I taught the sewing class at P.A.C.E. I was so scared I thought I was going to be sick. I thought, what am I doing? This is not me. But as I look back, I know that I had always hoped to be an elementary school teacher and I remember talking about that a number of times in the Women's Discussion Group. At first, I didn't think of the sewing class as being a teacher and that I was actually beginning to fulfil my ambition. I found that it gave me so much satisfaction that I was a part of what the students did. When we're talking about hope, I think of one student in the Sewing Class that couldn't sew at all and finally finished a whole suit. She was so happy!

"It is the same with the kids in the After-School program. One of the girls, Lisa, was having problems with math. I sat down and we went through it step by step.

Finally at the end she caught on and she turned to me very excited, saying; 'I know how to do it now. Donna showed me.' Wow! I had a part in that."

Melissa's Story

"From a very young age, without even knowing it, I was involved in community work - starting at St. Columba House pre-school, to holding my first small, but hard-working job when I was 11 and 12 years old, washing dishes for the School Lunch program at St. Columba. I made the large sum of \$2.50 a week and felt so proud of it. Without realizing it I was doing community work, talking about the lunch program to my friends and telling them they could eat there for just 25 cents for a whole meal. I remember singing grace and thanking the Lord for our meal. It is only as I grew older that I realized how important and special those years were to me and the hope it gave to the many families in our community."

Melissa had difficulty in school and shared how important it can be to have someone support or believe in you. She recalled; "I had a High School teacher that really used to make me feel good. A lot of the other teachers made me feel stupid in school, because I didn't read well. Mr. Anthony was a teacher from Trinidad and he always paid special attention to me. He was nice and no matter how bad I read -the words were always mixed up and I just didn't see them the way everybody else did - I was confident with him. He visited us

at my mother's house and if I had trouble at the office he would come down with me to make sure they didn't get down on my back too hard. A lot of the frustration was because I was finding school so hard and he gave me a lot of support. It was difficult for me to keep up and I always got discouraged. He was always there for me. He said you're going to do well and you are going to be someone. He was the first one to give me encouragement."

"It is funny sometimes in community work how you always want to do more and it is never enough. We sometimes forget all the work and people we have helped and who have helped us along the way. I remember when I was a teenager volunteering as a coach for the Special Olympics for the intellectually challenged, the fullness I felt in my life when I was with them. These special people are so easily pleased and get so much pleasure from the smallest achievements. The smiles and love I always received left me feeling that I made a difference.

"As I grew older my work in the 'House' (St. Columba House) came to have a bigger impact on my life and how I would live it. Working as a Day Camp counsellor to working in the "Working Out" Job Search Project, gave me respect, confidence and maturity. The guidance from the staff and volunteers who were so dedicated to their work, showed me that the work was not only hard, but could be satisfying.

"When I was on my own with two very young children after

a marriage that did not work out, I found myself on welfare and just another statistic in the government's eyes. I was not happy and found myself looking for employment. That is when hope re-entered my life. You guessed it! I was back at the 'House', working in the "Point in Print" community journal project, helping to co-ordinate the Point At Work reupholstery co-operative and feeling an enormous amount of energy inside.

"My mom, who is my mentor, gave me strength, love and a listening ear whenever it was needed. It is from her that I learned the importance of community work. Whether she knew it or not, it was her guidance, understanding and sensitivity in her work in the community that helped me know what I wanted to do with my life. She is a strong, hard-working woman who has left an enormous impact on everyone's lives she has touched."

Faye's Story

"I will start my story with my early connections to Saint Columba House and the Point, because this community has really turned me around. I asked to do my field placement for my final year of ministry training at St. Columba House. I come from a working class background but had been lucky to have the chance to go on to University and then had moved into a very comfortable lifestyle. As I did my theological training I was increasingly disturbed by the growing disparities between rich and poor, both here in Canada and globally, and what I should be trying to do about it. So I came here to learn and ended

up working with Myrna to start up the 'Hand in Hand' program for intellectually challenged adults.

"I was a real greenhorn, but working with Myrna, meeting with people here and being involved in community actions, began to open my eyes to both the injustice in our society and the strengths of the people in the Point. I remember so clearly an incident that was a real turning point for me. We had developed a funding proposal to start up the 'Hand in Hand' program and were meeting with a woman from the Board of a major charitable organization (which will go nameless). I had seen first-hand the very special gifts Myrna and others in the community offered in helping people take charge of their lives, but this woman could only focus on formal educational credentials. Her comments were very critical and offensive to the people in the community and I could feel my anger mounting. She represented the judgemental opinions of so many out there and she wasn't even aware of what she was doing to the community people she was talking to. That day I saw so clearly what the stakes were and I stopped sitting on the fence.

"A few years later I was able to return as Director of St. Columba House and the learning really began. It has taken a long time as a 'non-Point person' to find my way, but this is really my community now. I found such strength and determination in the countless ways people struggle against unfair odds to make life livable. But it was the women who

struggled to keep Lorne School open and went on to develop the Point Adult Centre for Education that first showed me what hope was all about. We hit so many obstacles, but people never gave up. I have marvelled at the energy and commitment of women whose lives are already too heavy, to hang in. I have seen the power of community action and have been energized by it. People from the outside comment how hard it must be to deal with such tough situations all the time, but I know that it is here in this community that one finds the energy, the faith and a deeply rooted hope that changes everything. In writing this book together, we are trying to express what this really means."

We came back to the sense in which hope is so very present and tried to convey what this is. Myrna spoke of the discouragement we all face in confronting seemingly insurmountable problems, she also marvelled that we don't get more discouraged than we do. It is the "carrying on" that is the hope itself and the determination that there will continue to be hope. As Myrna said, " the struggle is the hope."

The question about what brings us hope continued to be so present in our discussions in the months that followed. Sometimes it seems like such hard work that it is difficult to see how this struggle can be called hope. We are saying that it is just hard work, but also saying that is hope - the hard work is also hope. The hope is right in the middle of such

work as the struggle to keep P.A.C.E. alive or the Upholstery Project going. That is the presence of God for us, the hope in the middle of the struggle.

But at the same time, hope is "out there", challenging us to do more and to hang in. It is this movement back and forth that makes it so strong. It is there, but it is not there. It is here, but it is "out there". It is the core of whatever you are doing and you have to grab that and shape it. As Melissa said, "It is the heart that keeps you going and the blood going and beating. It is right there and yet you are always struggling to get there."

CHAPTER TWO

HOPE is COMMUNITY

The Point is a poor community. There is no doubt about that. But there is a spirit and commitment here in this community that would be very hard to find anywhere else. People really chip in and help each other. When there is a fire, and there are many, people all help out by going around to community groups to find the help that is needed. There are so many people involved in the welfare of the community.

Generation after generation have lived in Point St. Charles. Most people have grandparents and great-grandparents that have lived here and those roots are very important. People came here from Ireland during the famine in the 1800's and from France, because this was an industrial area. Our ancestors built the bridges for Montreal, the Lachine Canal and the factories that encircle the community. There was lots of work!. Much of the housing that is still here is factory housing built for the workers. People were working, but they were really exploited and there was a lot of poverty from the beginning. The Black Rock that sits by the entrance to the Victoria Bridge was put there to remember the over 1,000 people that died building that bridge and in the typhoid sheds along the canal. It was always a working class community, but now the majority of the people have no work.

So there is a lot of pride in both the history and the community spirit in the Point. It is one of the poorest areas of Montreal, but because of a long history of militancy and struggle it has survived with its own identity intact. However, it also has a reputation that is both positive and negative. We had many lively discussions about the blessings and hardships of being from "the Point".

Pride in "the Point"

Melissa said; "When people ask me where I am from, I'll say the Point and sometimes people will say, "Pointe Claire?" (a West Island affluent community). When I say, no, Point St. Charles they say "Really?" (with great astonishment). So I answer, 'Yeah, that's where I'm from!' I'm actually proud to say that I'm from Point St. Charles. I think it is because of the reputation that it has and I used to feel like adding; 'Do you want to pick a fight?' (this was followed by gales of laughter from everyone). When we went to school, it was always - 'Don't pick on her. She's from the Point.' It was always like that."

Elizabeth added; "Even though our family has always worked, when people ask my son where he lives, he will say Montreal. He will never say anything about being from Point St. Charles. It is not that he is not proud to live here. He is just embarrassed to say the Point, because people have a misconception about what the Point is. They think there are

gangs here and you can't walk safely. People from the outside who come to P.A.C.E. (the Point Adult Centre for Education) are concerned whether it is safe to walk from the Metro."

There are no anglophone secondary schools in the community and so teens always have to go out of the community for High School. Even the Protestant elementary school has now been closed and those children are bussed to Westmount, the wealthiest community in Canada. These factors have made it necessary to find a way to cope with peer pressure in outside communities.

Melissa spoke about her experience as an adolescent and said; "People always knew, that if nothing else, the Point kids have that closeness. If there was trouble, it was true - all the kids from the Point stuck together, even if they had friends outside the Point."

Donna added; "When I went to High School, the only time I felt badly about coming from the Point was when there were problems with ethnic groups. There was a group of Blacks going up against the Point kids. That was the only time in my life I ever remember I was afraid to say I was from the Point. Besides that I could never understand why people thought that Point St. Charles was bad."

Faye asked; "Do you remember the women volunteers from the Reclaim program who were supposed to teach literacy at the Point Adult Centre for Education? They refused to come to the school because they thought our community was too dangerous,

so they asked the students to come to their homes, outside the Point. Of course, no one went along with that and their teaching here was ended."

Donna recalled her experience in Sunday School at the Gospel Church on Ryde St. "One of the teachers, who lived outside the Point, told my mother when she came for lunch one day that they were worried about coming into the Point to teach Sunday School, because of gangs and violence. But they said that after becoming involved with the children, they went back and told the others that it was not what they had thought. There was nothing to be afraid of."

Staying in school is hard

We discussed how hard it is for teens to keep up with others outside the community in schools and the tough memories some of us had ourselves. The drop-out rate is exceedingly high from the Point, 50% of the population is functionally illiterate and the average level of education is Grade 9. There are so many factors that produce this problem and we are very concerned about understanding how we might turn this around.

We spoke of our concern that the kind of education that children receive in a community like ours is often second-rate. Many teachers feel that children are a write-off even at the elementary school level. The local school, before it was closed down, had been stripped of all the extra programs

like special education classes and French immersion. So children were bussed out of the community for these programs instead of putting extra care and resources into an area that has so little. Myrna said that she felt "Education is lower here and people have to work so hard to get what their kids need for school. It is not that the concern isn't there or that they don't try to educate their kids. Parents have worked very hard, especially over the last 20 years for their children's education and to keep our schools in the community. I think we get second-rate teachers. We have often been told that the children had to be put back when they got to James Lyng High School. The schools are putting the children down themselves."

Elizabeth spoke about her experience as a Teacher's Aid at Westmount Park School (the English Protestant school to which Point children are bussed) and said; "Many of the children don't have enough to eat. We are starting breakfast programs and lunch programs. A lot of the children come to school and haven't eaten. We see such a big difference now. Their whole attitude changes."

Many of us were very involved for years in the fight to keep the elementary school open in the Point. Our children had a daily hot lunch program at Saint Columba House that would not be offered at the school they are now bussed to. So when the decision was made to close the school, we at least bargained to guarantee a lunch program for the children.

However, institutions have short memories and the program was cut back this year.

With all the so-called concern in Quebec about school drop-outs, it is hard for us to understand how little will there is to tackle the fundamental problems created by conditions of poverty. High Schools do not seem to have dealt with food problems and there is a real stigma attached to kids who can't afford to buy their food in cafeterias.

Donna told us; "My daughter won't take a lunch to school with her. She leaves without breakfast and if she doesn't have money for lunch too, then she goes the whole day without eating. None of the kids take their lunch. So she doesn't want to be different."

Melissa spoke of a similar situation with her brother. "I found out that my young brother, Ivan, would go to school in the morning and then he would leave at lunchtime. Or he would arrive just after lunch. Then I realized that it was because he didn't have money for lunch. The family just didn't have it. When I contacted the school, they told me that there were tickets at the school for those who needed them and that all he had to do was come to ask for them. I said that maybe he was embarrassed to come and that was why I was telling them about the problem.

"When I went to school, it was the jeans that were important - Sergio Valenti. I felt like a rag-picker. I feel like a rag-picker these years too, but in high school I

especially didn't feel comfortable going to school. And I didn't understand how other people I knew who were poor could have leather jackets or Sergio Valenti jeans. I never understood that." It is one thing to feel that clothes are not important, but when you don't have the choice and are labelled by what you wear by others, it is very hard.

Elizabeth and Donna are tutors in the After-School program at Saint Columba House. Many of the parents are not able to help their children with school work, no matter how much they would like to. Many families have so much pressure just surviving, that there isn't enough space or energy to give their children the academic support they need. The children who come to the program are really improving, but they need so much more. Many need to have one-on-one help and quieter places to work. When the children are bussed out of the area it is so hard for the parents to keep in touch with the school. There often isn't money to travel to the school and it is also very hard for many parents to feel at ease in schools outside of their community.

Strong women

With all the pressures on families, it seems that it is usually the women who take on most of the responsibility. In our community 46% of the families are single parent families and the majority are headed by women. Women are more independent and stronger, out of necessity.

Melissa talked about the women on her street and said, "They're the survivors. You know, everything is left to them. Even if they are on fixed income, with their husbands or boyfriends at home, it is the women who are left to do everything. I see it daily now and it really makes me angry. It is terrible! The women have to be so strong and they have so much put on their shoulders. They have to be so independent instead of being able to share, even though there are two adults in the house.

"I don't know if it is like this in other communities, but I know that here in the Point it is the woman who has full control over the house. She has no choice but to be in control of the finances. She has to make sure there is money for food, have the bills paid, the kids dressed and the husband dressed. For families on fixed income, it is the woman who receives the cheque and that is how they survive. I find that the men just don't play a major role in the family because they don't know how to. So economically and support-wise the women are often on their own."

Most of the men really want to work and go out early in the morning to job banks, but cannot find stable work. They go to work placement offices such as "Fairshare" and "Staff" at 5:30 in the morning, hoping to get a job for the day, at minimum wage. We recalled how this was just like the passage in the Bible about the workers waiting in the marketplace all

day to be hired.³ Work has always been the man's contribution to the family and without it, most of them have been unable to shift to new ways to relate within the family.

The lack of food is such a serious problem for so many people in the community. Like other cities across the country, Food Banks have sprung up to try to meet the desperate need for food and, even though we all see this as band-aid activity, it is a necessity. We are shocked by the increasing numbers of people who need food and very concerned that each week we see people lining up who have never had to ask for help before. We felt that no matter how sensitive one tries to be, there is no way to give out food that is not degrading to those who receive it.

Donna remarked that, "Now it seems that there are line-ups everywhere at all times of the month. It used to be just towards the end of the month." Even at the first of the month when people get their welfare cheque, after they have paid their rent, hydro, heat, telephone, there is nothing left for food. There used to be a lot more food programs for children in schools than there are now. The milk program at school and the hot lunches provided in areas of poverty are being cut back. The children from the Point are bussed to Westmount and, even though the majority of the children in the school qualify for a subsidized lunch program, it has been discontinued because the family income statistics include the

³ See Chapt. 4, p. 113 - 115.

wealthy minority in that school.

Myrna has been involved in helping with a Collective Kitchen, which has been an innovative way to face the food problem. She is impressed with the results she has seen and exclaimed very enthusiastically; "Collective Kitchens are great! They help people pool their money together, make meals, learn new ideas and find nutritious ways to feed their families. Plus it is also people getting together talking about issues that are important. As people talk about their situation and the system they are trying to survive in, they find that they are not the only ones in that situation. It can be very degrading if you think that you are just not managing your money right." In addition to providing inexpensive, nutritious meals for their families, the women find that they are not alone.

Another real challenge in our community is the relationship between the English and the French. In Point St. Charles, 60% of the residents are francophones and 35% anglophones (30 years ago these numbers were reversed). We talked about how historically the railway tracks always separated the French from the English, but that has really changed recently. In spite of differences and some tension, we all come together for actions or community causes. Elizabeth recalled that "there used to be more fighting between the French and English children, but there doesn't seem to be much of a problem now. There is French and English

in all the schools now and that makes a difference."

However, there are a lot of francophones that don't speak English and anglophones that don't speak French. It is hard to function together on committees because you might understand the other language, but not enough to express yourself and really participate. Myrna remarked; "But I am very comfortable here. I will speak French when I can, but even if we don't always understand every word, we find a way to communicate." We are trying to find new ways to meet and work together.

God is *in* the struggle

There are many churches in the Point, but for the majority of residents, organized religion doesn't have a very profound effect on their lives now. The churches are important to the older generation, but others do not find they are getting out of it what they want.

Melissa attends church irregularly and explained; "I know myself, being a younger mother, I do not go to church for the social aspects. I go for the religious aspects and there are no social events whatever. I just go to feel good and I always feel good when I leave church. I like my church in that sense, but the sermons are very boring and they're the same. But I've always said that when the church starts changing, the people will start going. They're in their old ways and I don't see them changing in the near future."

We all agreed that for traditional reasons the church is important for weddings, baptisms and funerals. Many in the community are Catholic and since the Catholic Church does not recognize civil marriages, people are married in the church. In Quebec, births were officially registered through baptism, but that has recently changed and you have to register the baby yourself at City Hall. We wondered if that would produce changes for young families in the future.

Myrna spoke very emphatically saying; "I think church is very important. I just don't find the church gives me what I need. I go there and listen to the sermon, but I want more than that. Maybe if people participated in the service it would help. I don't want them preaching to me, but I want them to help me understand what they mean by what they are reading. We do it different when we have our worship services at Saint Columba House. I am not blaming it on that, but I have a whole different outlook now on what I want. When I come home from church, I'm flustered. Really, it comes on like you have to do this! This is what was stated! God wants you to do that, that way!" she says, hitting the table as she speaks.

Melissa disagreed; "I don't find St. Gabe's (St. Gabriel Roman Catholic Church) that way. I find it very mellow. If you really listen now, they even talk about the times getting harder and that things have to change. But I find that the church itself hasn't changed and the church is not very

helpful in the community. They give food and furniture if needed, but only to people who belong to the parish - not just a person who has needs. I still look up to my priest and if I needed something, he would be there to help me. But I don't feel that the church is there for us in our struggles."

Myrna went on to say; "I think that a Christian community, or a church in a community is very important. They have the power to do so much. People are willing with open arms to do things that the church wants. They have to do constructive things within the church for the people to go, that are interesting for the people and makes them feel more involved. Not fund raisers to have a new paint job, or cushions or satin altars or stuff to buy for the church - but something that is going to help the community and help the church too. It is a two-way street. If you get involved in the community to do a special project that the community wants, they profit by doing a good deed and people will see that they are supportive of the community. It works both ways." At this point Myrna was becoming completely exasperated and finally ended by saying, "I am getting flustered! I don't want to talk about this any more!"

We had all expressed great disappointment and frustration that the local churches are not the place where we find support and encouragement for all the work we have been involved in to change the hard conditions that face people. This does not mean that we do not have faith. Our faith is at

the core of our community involvement. As Myrna explained; "You can't separate it. The work is the life and the life is the work. This is church for us!"

We see Saint Columba House as a church in action. For us, and many in the community, this is a place where we feel God's presence, where all people are welcome and where they gather to celebrate, to eat, to worship and support each other. Melissa added; "This is where God touches every one of us. I think God just means everything to everybody. I don't know anybody - Catholic, Protestant, whatever - that doesn't have faith. They really, really want so much. God is still giving them hope, faith, and that little extra to carry on. But people are not finding ways to express it. They are keeping it in themselves, in their families."

Myrna agreed; "They have faith. The majority of people have faith - in survival, in life, in their children."

This was a very heavy discussion and after a long period of quiet Donna said; "It just kind of hit me. The church preaches a heavenly God, when what we need, and I think people are looking for, is an earthly God. I think that for me, that is what I found in the Worship Group. I found a God that is not "up there" looking down, scratching his or her head. God is not looking down at this mess but God is in the struggle and God is trying to give some kind of support."

After looking at what our community is like, with all its strengths and weaknesses, we asked ourselves what makes it a

good place for us to live. For all of us, it is the support that is here and how easy it is to know people. In thinking about the strengths of the community Melissa began to talk about some people who have made such a difference here. "Rolly is very proud of the Point and the community. He puts great pride into his work. All these years he has put into the work here at St. Columba House in the Welfare Rights Committee! He is very proud of who he is and he doesn't look down on himself as a welfare recipient. He is a people person and he really helps people. He speaks of his friends and his family who grew up here and he is very proud."

A few months after this discussion, Rolly died suddenly of a heart attack at age 45. People from the whole community came together for his funeral at Saint Columba House - Protestants, Catholics, non-believers and other faiths. Rolly had no immediate family and it was so striking to us all that we, Saint Columba House and the organizations he worked with, were truly family. It was one of those special times, when in the midst of grief, you see more clearly, the meaning of "Amazing Grace", that presence of God in our midst in the fight against injustice. We spoke of the hope that he brought to so many people through his work against the dehumanizing welfare system and how bound together we are as a community of God's people in this work for social change. As we joined hands to sing "We Shall Overcome" at the close of the service, it was like a deep understanding of the hope that undergirds

us and a commitment to carry forth this work.

The Welfare system is a trap that neither encourages nor allows people to find ways to make it on their own. There are families that have been on welfare for generations and it is hard to know how that cycle will be broken.

Donna shared her concern that "the kids aren't given the tools to do something better or the parents aren't. They don't have any resources they can go to and try to better themselves. I know that as parents, we always want better for our children. But if you are on welfare, how can you give your child a half decent education? I have Jessica in school and she will go to college next year. I'll have to buy her books and everything and I'm already worried about it. College isn't supposed to be expensive compared to university, but if you have a family that is on welfare or on low income it is very hard, unless your child can work and supplement it by saving money."

Elizabeth replied; "Some people don't seem to have that energy or drive or something to show their children a different way. Money has a lot to do with it. It is the same with a family on low income. We all want better for our children, but if we don't show them how to get it, where are they going to learn? I would have gone further along. I stopped at high school because there was no money at all to go on. I would have loved to go on at that point, but there was no way. I got married instead. But I was one of the lucky

ones who got married to somebody who helped me along too. I mean, not totally in the beginning, when he felt my place was in the home too, like his mother. It does pass down. I don't know, but there must have been something in me. I have an extraordinary mother who pushed and let us know that we could do whatever we wanted. However the money wasn't there and you couldn't do any thing that you wanted."

Faye expressed her concern about the limitations people face and that "sometimes the vision of what we could do isn't very far beyond what we have seen in our families. We have seen this in the Women's Discussion group. The dreaming stops pretty close to home. It's tough, because it is not just the money, but whether we can imagine we could do it differently."

Myrna replied; "I got the feeling from some of our discussions lately, that people are just giving up. People have given up even trying to get jobs. I think that is what has made me feel so bad the last couple of meetings. You look around the table at the Women's Group and if you ask whether anything good has happened in the past week, there is so little."

Poor, living in poverty, low income or impoverished?

Although we began talking about our community as a "poor" community, we are not satisfied with what this word says or means to others. It feels like such a put-down to call people poor and yet it is so important to deal directly with what

poverty is and does. Some of us feel that using the words "people who live in poverty" is not as bad as "poor", but we still don't really like it.

Melissa doesn't see a problem with using the word poor and she explained; "Poor to me doesn't mean that I am unclean. I mean to me personally. That is why I use poor. Poor to me is somebody who struggles, who does without, who just cannot make it in this world, in this society."

"I often use 'low-income'; Faye said, "but I know it doesn't say the same thing. People on low-income have a tough time to make it. They have to watch every penny, but there is a sense that they have an income. People don't even consider welfare an income. They don't call it an income, even though it is. I use 'low-income' because other words can be insulting, but it doesn't really name poverty."

Myrna agreed; "It is not powerful enough either. But when I was away one time at a conference, the word poor was used and it really offended people."

We tried to find a way to express what must be said without offending people. Faye suggested that "when we use poverty it doesn't sound as though you are defining somebody by it but that it is a condition that you are forced to live in. People who live in poverty are not necessarily defined as 'the poor'. However, there are poor people throughout the world and we want to make connections with them -strong and political connections with the poor.

"When I met with the Mayan church people in Guatemala recently, they had a whole day of reflection on their work and what they are doing. The animator at one point used the Spanish word that means 'impoverished'. He said that he used it because 'im-poverished' means that somebody else has done it to you. He sees it as a political way to deal with poverty. Impoverished is an active word. It is not a condition, but it is something imposed on you. It is like somebody has been cheated and been impoverished. I thought it was very helpful."

Myrna replied; "It doesn't sound overwhelming. It doesn't sound like a nice way to say it, but it doesn't sound dirty. I guess that is what bothers me about 'poor'. When we say it, it sounds dirty."

"As soon as you said the word impoverished," Donna said; I thought, here is another ucky word. That was my first thought. But when you started to explain it, I loved the definition. I would have a much easier time with impoverished than to say that I am poor. I am thinking that poor does not give that person dignity. If anything, it strips it away. I am thinking that in that situation someone could say with at least some dignity, 'I am impoverished', because it is a situation that is inflicted on them. They didn't ask to be put there."

Then Myrna said very forcefully; "Well, I am going to say it -what I really think! I don't mind using impoverished

because now that we talked about it, we know what it is. But what about other women? They won't know what it means. How are they going to feel? We want to make sure we use language people understand."

We realize that this is a very difficult discussion that we will have to continue to work on. We don't like to use "people who live in poverty" and we don't like "the poor". "The poor" used to be used as a kind of rallying word to identify people who have been exploited and people who have rights that are not respected. Because of other people's opinions that to be poor is something dirty, it is not possible to use the word without it feeling judgemental. To a lot of people, if you are poor you are dirt, the scum of the earth. We know that it serves a lot of people's purposes to support that idea and to imply that people who are "impoverished" are of less value. There are too many bad memories of this kind of judgement!

Myrna thought back to her own hard experience of raising five children as a single parent on welfare and said; "I think it stayed with me. I'll never forget when someone brought me a food basket and said, 'Oh look at those kids, how clean they are!'. What did they think they were going to see?"

Whatever word or words we choose to use, poverty is the major problem in our community. 55% of the community is jobless and with Montreal as the city having the highest

unemployment in the country, there is no promise of change in the near future. Welfare income in Québec is less than 50% of the poverty line and each month there are further cut-backs or punitive conditions. So how do people survive? What happens to a community that is pushed deeper and deeper into poverty? What resources do we have to fight back or to find other solutions that will offer hope and dignity? The various ways we are engaged in this long-term work and the sources of hope for our community are the subject of this collective writing.

Fighting to survive

We have many strong community organizations that continue to work and fight for economic development, the rights of welfare recipients, affordable decent housing, accessible education, legal rights, ecological concerns, youth programs and centres and resources for women.

However, in the meantime, we are confronted with the problems and changing values in a community where people are fighting to survive. This means that people are forced to use the system in any way they can to put food on the table. It is not considered dishonest not to declare babysitting money or the income from occasional labour jobs, when after a very low minimum, the earnings will be deducted dollar for dollar off the welfare cheque. People work on the side because they have to make extra money to survive. Many families pay two thirds of their income on rent and heat, leaving almost

nothing for other basic essentials. Line-ups at food banks continue to increase and what was once considered a basic necessity in our society - a telephone - has become too expensive for many families.

Into this monthly struggle to make it, there are always the unexpected crises and needs. For example, if your washing machine breaks down, there is no laundromat nearby and you have no car to take your children's laundry, what are the options?

If you are on welfare you cannot get a loan from a bank or credit company and you cannot get a credit or lay-away at any regular department store. The majority of people in our community get in touch with a "Home Merchant" or a "Sales Merchant" (called a variety of other names we have decided not to print) to get them through the crises. He will either pick you up and take you to a store to purchase what you need or he will phone ahead and tell the store that he is covering a line of credit of a certain amount. You pay about 40% interest and the stores you have to shop in are often very expensive. You can't shop around for a sale somewhere, but have to go where you are sent. So the whole system is very expensive and the longer you take to pay, the higher it costs because of interest. If you are on welfare, you may only have to pay \$25 a month, but it never gets paid off.

We estimate that about 80% of the people in the community have used Home Merchants because they have no other choice.

It means that when you are broke you can go shopping for what you need - a fridge, a stove, beds for the kids, clothing, whatever. There is no way you could ever save up for these when your income is 50% of the poverty line. But it also becomes an accepted way to manage in the community and there doesn't seem to be any solution to mounting debts. This is a real concern for us with our children as they grow up. We try to discourage them from falling into the same traps, but they will probably have to learn on their own.

Myrna recalled; "When we were younger, we never had the things that other children got. It didn't have to be a lot. I wanted just something like the other children got. I think it goes with me never thinking I am going to have enough food. I always feel guilty at Christmas too that I couldn't get things for my children when they were younger and so I buy much more than I should. Not having enough for a long time does that to you and you just can't erase it."

Donna talked about how it was in her family and said; "We went to a merchant once. He was very nice, but that was the last time. We are never going to get in debt again. I grew up with the principle that you save your money and if you don't have it, you do without. I have brought the kids up that way too. If you don't have, you do without."

We began to talk about the availability of "hot stuff" (stolen goods) in the community and this has been a very difficult subject for us to deal with. It is having an effect

on the community and is a real problem for all of us to deal with for our children.

Melissa explained; "I think that the people on my street look at it more with a sense of relief that they can get something that they need at a cheaper price and then they have more money for something else. As things get worse, it is going to get worse. I see people getting poorer. More and more people are buying hot stuff now. Most of the people who go around selling are not teenage kids. They are adults with families who are doing it to provide for their families."

We had great difficulty deciding how much of our discussion we were willing to share. But we felt that it is a part of our reality and so we should try to deal with it together. We have disagreements among us, but see it as a very important issue. How are we going to deal with it in our families? What does it mean when a whole community tolerates it? These are some of our comments:

"None of us want our children to be buying hot stuff or know about it. So if it gets more and more out there and our children know about it, then in the long term what is going to happen?"

"In our community there are no jobs and no money. Then people get into a situation where they feel they don't have a choice and so this is how they manage."

"If I buy something hot, I have to live with that. I have to settle my own conscience, whatever way I do that."

"I would never have one hesitation about someone whose kids were starving, going and stealing. But the situation of many people buying hot stuff is not necessarily that. It is also tied to the problems of us needing more and more, like the kids with the right kind of running shoes. But when a family makes the choice that your kids will learn to do without, it is very tough on them at school when they don't have what the others have."

"It is a hard decision. My kids did without so many things."

"Who am I now to sit here and think what is right or wrong? Not that I didn't feel bad when I did it, when I bought something that was hot before. I always felt guilty. But all of a sudden it seems that we are talking about what other people do and why they do it. But who am I to sit here and say what people should do who are really stuck?. I don't want to come across as judgemental, but on the other hand, I don't want to lose the importance of what we are talking about."

"I don't blame them, I blame the situation that they are in. That is what I blame."

"In the context in which you can't make it, what is right or wrong is very different, but it is a slippery slope that gets you into all kinds of other trouble."

This has been a very tough discussion for us and we decided to read from a book that Faye thought might give us

some ideas to bounce off. We read Chapter 5, "Beating the System" and Chapter 10, "The Bottom Line" from a book called "Monday Morality - Right and Wrong in Daily Life"⁴. It didn't seem to resolve anything, but it certainly provoked quite a reaction!

We felt that the book had not dealt with the situation of people in dire need and that the emphasis seemed to be on individual morality. It didn't seem fair if each individual person had to deal with this just as their own personal problem. We never treat anything else in the community as just our personal problem. We always look at how taxation, the welfare system and the lack of jobs affects us all. We look at the effects of increasing poverty on health, the ability to learn, the lack of dignity and the exhaustion of the struggle to survive. But whether people buy hot stuff to survive is never brought up in the community as an issue. There just seems to be no way to handle it - yet.

We are left with many questions concerning conflicting values. What are real needs? Are these things necessary to the point that I will be ready to risk the beliefs that I live by? We agreed that there is a serious danger if a practise becomes so accepted, that we stop asking these questions. Through our discussions together we have looked at the possible effects on our children and will continue to look for

⁴ Wakin, Edward, Monday Morality - Right and Wrong in Daily Life, Paulist Press, New York, 1980.

ways to deal with this situation collectively.

Collective action has shaped our community

Point St. Charles has a long history of community organizations engaged in finding solutions to problems of poor housing, lack of education, malnutrition and accessibility to medical care through community mobilization and political action. We thought back to some of the significant actions that have left an impact on us and have been the source of encouragement for ongoing involvement.

Twenty-five years ago some concerned citizens and medical students set up a mobile clinic⁵ because of the lack of good medical care in the Point. It was very important for the community because it did not single out people as the needy poor, but was seen as a very supportive service that they were involved in. The Community Clinic grew out of this and became the first of its kind in Quebec. The CLSC's (Centre Local de Services Communautaires - the system of government community clinics that have been set up throughout the province) were modelled after the Point clinic, but it remains as the only autonomous, community-run medical service. Last year when the government decided to incorporate it into the provincial system, the whole community rallied around to defend our right to maintain control. After a year with negotiations involving

⁵ The United Church of Canada provided seed funding for this mobile clinic.

all the community groups and public meetings attended by hundreds of citizens, we won the right to remain autonomous. What a victory!

The Legal Clinic, which started in 1971 in much the same way as the Medical Clinic, was also a first for Quebec. Myrna recalled the help and support she received from the clinic when she went through a divorce 25 years ago. People really pulled together to guarantee that everyone would have the right to legal help regardless of whether they could afford to pay for it. There was a strong citizens' committee that has been very involved in running the clinic over the years. If people needed help with things they didn't understand and all the big words of legal documents or procedures, the Legal clinic was always there for them. Even with all the cut-backs in legal aid services, our clinic has done their best to work the loop-holes and to bend the rules to be able to help the community.

A battle everyone remembers in the Point was the fight to keep the Fire Station as an historic site. It was to be demolished to make way for a highway to run right through the middle of the Point. The whole community defended the building, stopped the highway and now the Fire Station houses a Public Library and a Golden Age Centre. People really remember this as one of the big battles and a victory that has really made a difference in preserving the community.

The co-operative housing movement began in Point St.

Charles over twenty years ago, through the Parallel Institute, a United Church funded project that was housed in Saint Columba House. This developed into a housing movement that has succeeded in holding back a complete take-over of the community through gentrification and there are now approximately 40% of families in the Point in co-op housing. Point St. Charles is ideally located close to the core of downtown Montreal with easy access by public transit, making it a major target for "redevelopment". Without this mobilization, the community would never have been able to keep together and the effects of poverty would be even worse. Once again, with major funding sources disappearing for low-cost housing, it requires continued pressure and citizens' involvement to try to meet the heavy demands for such affordable housing.

As we spoke of the significance of these long-time struggles in our community, we appreciated how important this history has been in providing the base that has allowed this community to survive. The people have a tremendous pride in what has been built together and the hope for the future comes out of such shared experiences. It is a poor community, at times a tough community, but a sense of spirit that is quite unique. What a gift!

CHAPTER THREE

HOPE in ACTION

- the experience of three Community Groups

We are all involved in many activities and groups that are working to change living conditions in our community. To try to understand more fully what brings energy and hope through this engagement, we will look very specifically at the role of three different groups -the Point Adult Centre for Education (P.A.C.E.), the Women's Discussion Group and the Point at Work co-operative (P.A.W.). Our reflections are based on consultations with all the participants in these groups, followed by further discussion with our writing collective. The process itself has had significant effects and we will discuss this as well.

THE POINT ADULT CENTRE FOR EDUCATION (P.A.C.E.)

Before P.A.C.E. began in 1985, a lot of ground work was done. It all began when the constant threat of closing Lorne School (the only English Protestant school in the Point) affected its enrolment. A group of concerned women approached Faye Wakeling at St. Columba House, in hopes of getting assistance on how to deal with the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal (P.S.B.G.M.) After numerous meetings together, we began on our quest to seek out new ways of utilizing Lorne School.

We decided the best way to find out what the people wanted was to go out into the community. We conducted a door-to-door survey of Point St. Charles! A number of ideas were suggested, but the most popular one was an English Adult Education Centre situated right in our community.

After compiling our results, we met with representatives from the P.S.B.G.M. in an effort to convince them of the need for such a centre. We remember their initial reaction very well. They were no less than shocked that we would suggest such an idea. After all, there were already existing adult education centres at Westmount High School and at the High School of Montreal on University Street downtown. In their minds, these centres were easily accessible to citizens of Point St. Charles.

They had missed the importance of what we were trying to do. With 65% of the population on Welfare or U.I.C. and 46.4% of citizens over 15 who had not completed Grade 9 and with 55% of the population functionally illiterate, it was obvious that we needed a centre in our area which would be readily accessible and affordable. We needed to offer education that met the needs of people in the community who did not have good memories of school and courses that respected what they knew from their life experience. It wasn't a privilege. It was a right!

After many meetings with the Director of Adult Services and some of the commissioners, we finally received the mandate

to go ahead. We also had succeeded in our request to have the appointment of a liaison person within the School Board to work with us. This proved to be a great asset in the coming months as it was crucial to have someone from "inside" the system, committed to supporting our struggle.

P.A.C.E. officially began in the Fall of 1985, organized and run by women of the community. We were located on the third floor of Lorne School while the elementary school occupied the rest of the building. Although we had won the right to affordable English Adult Education in our own community, we knew there would be many obstacles to overcome. The only difference was that, with the help of Faye and St. Columba House, we had become more confident in what we could now do. We were making a difference!

No typewriters, no typing

An example of the endless obstacles that we were forced to overcome concerned a typewriting class that we offered. We had sufficient registrants for this class, but we were told by the Director of Adult Services that we couldn't have the class because there weren't any typewriters available. This is where our liaison person came to the rescue. She found some manual typewriters for us to use in the class. We were then told we still couldn't have the class because we didn't have typing desks. Again, our liaison person came to the rescue, searched throughout the schools of the region and found some

typing desks. Even though there were then objections from the school board that we should have electric typewriters, the class finally began. We did eventually get electric typewriters, but we never had any complaints from the students because the people of the Point were basically happy just to have the class. They were so easily pleased.

Our discouragement was starting to show. It seemed that every time we tried to get another course started, something came up, such as no sewing machines for the sewing course. Again, with the help of our liaison person, we managed to overcome these obstacles with the knowledge that there were more hurdles to come. Even though there were times we felt like giving up, we knew that we never would. We also had so much support from other community organizations and churches, not only to help keep Lorne School open, but also to keep P.A.C.E. going. They believed in us and this only helped us to fight that much harder.

Although our fight to keep Lorne School open ended in defeat three years later, we knew the battle had just begun. We weren't going to lose P.A.C.E. too. We had put so much time and energy into P.A.C.E. and we were finally becoming a symbol of HOPE in desperate times. There was no way we were going to lose that HOPE without a fight. Our educational goals must be allowed to develop and P.A.C.E. would remain open.

Elementary school closes

Lorne School closed in the summer of 1987 and was bought by the City of Montreal that same summer. Again, after a lot of mobilization and pressure, we signed a lease with the City of Montreal from October 1987 to June 1988 to use the school building. Two years were spent in the abandoned school. We incurred considerable expenses for tenant's and personal liability insurance, as well as maintenance and cleaning costs. The P.S.B.G.M. would only fund courses that were eligible for subsidization through the Quebec Ministry of Education, but there were other course needs that couldn't be met because of particular restrictions or tuition expenses that the low-income population that we serve couldn't meet. The P.S.B.G.M. would only provide funding if we could get a rent-free locale and they provided partial funding for a coordinator.

It wasn't an easy task maintaining P.A.C.E. in an abandoned building. Some nights when the heating system broke down, it was so cold during the classes that we had to wear our winter coats and boots to stay warm. This didn't seem to deter our students. We continued P.A.C.E. for three more years (1987 - 1990) in the abandoned Lorne School building.

We had over 200 registrations each semester. This widespread interest and enthusiasm for learning reinforced our conviction of the need to continue to offer adult education to the anglophone sector that had no such centre before P.A.C.E.

started.

The City of Montreal realized the need for P.A.C.E. They not only allowed us to stay, finally rent-free, in Lorne School, they also helped us to move to an alternate school building to continue our programs while they had the Lorne building renovated. With the support of the City of Montreal behind us, we were able to negotiate with the Catholic School Commission to use the top floor of Jeanne Leber School (the French Catholic elementary school) from the Fall of 1990 to the Spring of 1991. The City of Montreal moved our equipment that we needed to the new location and stored the rest for us.

Lorne School was turned into co-operative housing, but one floor was set aside for P.A.C.E. Before renovations began on Lorne School, representatives from the City met with us to see what our needs for P.A.C.E. were and asked for our input on the number of classrooms we needed, the location of washrooms, design of a kitchen/sewing room, outlets, etc. The City of Montreal understood our conviction for the need of English Adult Education in the community. What a breakthrough! With the stability of having a permanent locale we began concentrating on the actual running of P.A.C.E. and offering the courses that the people wanted. P.A.C.E. was finally making its mark in the community.

Criteria changes

Even when the Ministry of Education changed its criteria

for funding and we found ourselves slipping between the cracks, we stood up for what we had already achieved. Just before our Fall 1991 session was to begin, we received news from the P.S.B.G.M. that all our teachers' salary funding of \$25,000 had been cut. It felt like we were starting the fight all over again. This time, through St. Columba House, many United Church people got involved and organized a telephone blitz to the Chairman of the School Board. When presidents of major companies voiced their concerns, the Board had to respond to their pressure. The P.S.B.G.M. found the money from another budget to allow P.A.C.E to continue.

When we moved back into our newly renovated locale in the Fall of 1991, we had a sense of pride in knowing that we would finally be allowed to pursue our educational goals. We had been a part of P.A.C.E. from the beginning and our dream was now a reality.

We now had a permanent locale and funding for academic courses. The P.S.B.G.M. granted some funding for our coordinator, for teachers' salaries and materials for academic courses such as French, Computer (Basic, Lotus, Word Perfect), Spanish, New Math, English as a Second Language, etc. Each year we submit an Annual Report of our activities to the P.S.B.G.M. Adult Education Committee and request a grant for the upcoming year. Finally it seems that they have recognized the importance of this work and have been very supportive. Their funding is very important, but we, the community, must

maintain control over the education in the centre.

P.A.C.E. pays for the teachers' salaries and materials for leisure courses from money collected at registration and other grants or donations we have received.⁶ Over the years some of the leisure courses we have offered are Sewing, Arts & Crafts, Aerobics, Cooking, Calligraphy, Silkscreening, Jazz Ballet, Drawing & Painting, Self-Defense for Women, Tai-Chi, Hairdressing, C.P.R. & First Aid. These courses are usually taught by people in the community who have special talents and this is an important way for us to help people use their skills. We also find funding for literacy courses which are so vital. However, we have had great difficulty encouraging those who do not read to participate in classes. The literacy classes have been so significant for those who have attended but we are not satisfied with the number of people we have reached.

This year we had a membership drive which gives the member of P.A.C.E. reduced course rates and a voice in the running of the centre. The only criteria for becoming a member of P.A.C.E. is that you must reside in Point St. Charles and support our goals.

It has been a long, difficult struggle to begin and to

⁶ Grants received for the Point Adult Centre for Education: - PLURA (Ecumenical coalition of the Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, & Anglican churches for grassroots groups engaged in social justice), Quebec Ministry of Education, Community Clinic of Point St. Charles, Literacy Partners of Quebec, University Women's Club.

keep P.A.C.E. open, but the outcome has been very rewarding. We are fulfilling a need in our community and at the same time we are helping people to realize their potential and capabilities. We have become a stepping stone to further education for some people. For others, we are the place to come and learn very informally.

P.A.C.E. is truly education with a difference! Citizens have been involved with setting up and developing the centre and providing a strong back-up network for P.A.C.E. ¹

The Impact of P.A.C.E.

The P.A.C.E. Committee gathered to look back over the years of involvement in fighting for and building this centre and to discuss what impact it has had on our community. We felt that one of the most important achievements of P.A.C.E. has been that the students feel better about themselves and have developed a sense of pride in their ability to learn. A lot of people say that when they first come to take a course, it is primarily because it is cheap. But then when they get into it, many are very surprised at what they have learned and that they are able to learn. They didn't realize what potential they had.

We recalled a very special story from our first year at P.A.C.E. during the year-end evaluation meeting with all the participants. Someone pointed out that Elizabeth was

¹ Garbish, Elizabeth, History of P.A.C.E.

scrubbing the floors and doing the cleaning all by herself, that this wasn't fair and the group would have to do something about it. An older woman stood up very straight and with great pride said; "Well! I learned how to use a computer this year. If I can use a computer, I can do anything! So I certainly can mop the floor and set things up here." It was the way she said it that was so unforgettable - "if I can learn to use the computer, I can do anything!" It was like something had opened up for her.

Elizabeth smiled and said; "This is what we wanted. This is part of the impact we had hoped for. It can be so intimidating to go to a big college or a school outside of the community, but we have bypassed all of that. People say that it is very informal and friendly. People are really happy to be a part of it. I have had such good feedback. They know that they are welcome to share their ideas. It is not just going in and following a curriculum from the teacher. They are actually a part of what they are going to learn and that is the difference. That is our main success right there." One member replied; "People who work in P.A.C.E are from this community. So it began right here and it is going to stay here."

Donna agreed enthusiastically and said; "It was just the common people who started it. We had no experience in running an Adult Education centre or formal education or popular education." We learned though as we went along and we also

made mistakes.

Faye added; "And you didn't give up, which surprised the School Board. I think that in itself has had an impact and given hope to the community. You have hung in there and carried on in spite of enormous obstacles all these years."

Elizabeth responded; "There is a lot of hope and people do see the hope. We struggled for a long time and there were so many people behind us. You always think that if you are running an adult centre you are supposed to be a university graduate. But we are not and we are proud that we are not. We started this out of a need and it is still here now. P.A.C.E. is here to stay. We are a thorn in some people's side, like the School Board, but they will just have to get used to us I guess."

One member of the committee spoke of becoming more confident since she has been involved in P.A.C.E. and helping with the literacy class. This work has brought out her own skills and a new understanding of what she can do in the future. Another young woman found that her "people skills" were put to the test and she has learned that she is very good at encouraging people to talk. Others pointed out how she keeps everyone laughing and spirits high.

There are people from the community that have taught courses that had never done this before and were surprised to find that they could teach others (such as ceramics, aerobics,

carpentry, sewing, drawing, cooking, hairdressing). This has had an important impact on the community.

There are lots of challenges ahead and goals that we have not yet met. We have been able to reach very few of the 50% of our community that need literacy help and we need to utilize popular education methods in more of our courses. Many parents need child care to take classes and that is a goal for the future. We renewed our determination to bring more people into the committee work so that they could both help find solutions and also reap the benefits each of us have found in our involvement with the centre. P.A.C.E. is an example that you can fight bureaucracy and win. It shows there is room for everyone's skills and that even a community like ours can succeed in education.

THE WOMEN'S DISCUSSION GROUP

"We are a support group. When we come together we realize we all have the same problems really and we are not isolated. We may not have solutions, but just to know that other women are in the same boat, makes a big difference in how you feel about your situation. When you talk about something you don't feel so alone."

This was the first response when the group discussed why we gathered. For more than 10 years the group has met once a week at Saint Columba House and during that time there has

been remarkable growth, challenge and results. We agreed to participate in this reflection for the women's collective writing, with the understanding that we would not be necessarily identified and that we all would have some say in the final write-up. So this discussion became a way for the whole group to reflect on what we have been about over the years.

We realize that our expectations vary and also that at different stages in our lives we are looking for different involvement. For some, just to get out and have adult company is a marvellous treat. "As a single parent, it is important to get together and also to have a break from my son. When you have kids, you just don't have an opportunity to sit around and talk because you are worrying about the baby crying or something. But here, we have no worries because someone is looking after the kids." For many women this is the first motivation that brings them into the group, but after that what keeps us involved are the activities, the discussions and really getting into issues that concern us as women.

Getting out and trying new things

We began to talk about what has changed us over the years and for many of us the outings we have gone on together have really been highlights. A few times a year we receive subsidized tickets from the Centaur Theatre and we have seen some wonderful plays. For many of us this was a first and

something we would never have been able to do on our own. We recalled the play we had seen by a playwright from the Point who writes about our community. One of the women said, "I remember going to David Fennario's play and we weren't happy with how he showed the Point. So we called him here to talk with the Women's Group about it. He came with his "bodyguard", as he called him, to talk to us. There were about 18 women there. It was really neat that we could actually do that.

"I always grew up thinking that the rules were like this and that's the way it goes. But now, with other actions we have taken and calling in David Fennario, it is teaching me that, Hey, if you don't like it, you have the right to stand up and say something. No matter who it is against, even if it is an authority figure, that as an individual or as a group you have that right. You don't have to sit back and say that that's the rules or that's the way it goes and we're not allowed to say anything about it. I can stand up for my rights now."

"For me, Centaur Theatre just seemed out of my reach before I came to the Women's Group. I don't know if I thought that I didn't belong there, but it was out of my reach. So when we started going, the first time I went I just couldn't believe I was going. Then after we went it was the issues that were important. The play always represented something and when we came back we always had an important issue to talk

about after. If we liked it or didn't like it, there were still important issues. In some way, either in our community or in our own lives, we could find something in it. It really, really made a big change."

"The Arena art show by local artists that we went to a few weeks ago was very interesting. I wouldn't have gone on my own. I didn't even know about it. It's like we live here but we don't really know what is out there. When we start going out to places in Montreal, we realize what we're missing."

Our visit to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to see the Duane Hansen exhibit was very powerful. His sculptures of real life figures, many of them working class people, had been very disturbing to see. A little girl, sitting alone in a corner, looking so vulnerable, was a hard reminder of bad memories for many. We found it tough, depressing and very moving as we felt the despair and isolation of all the figures. As one woman said, "That's how it is these days. You work like a dog and what do you get out of it?" In our discussion we recalled how much this exhibit was like real life and that it was good to see such reality displayed in a large museum. Someone remarked that "it showed the well-to-do people as well and you could see that money isn't everything. Even if you were rich, it showed the worries and the struggles. It was sad. It showed life like it is. We have problems here, but there are a lot of things we have here, like getting together as a community, that they don't have."

Another commented that "It showed in a sense that life is what we make of it. Not that it has to be sad. There is a lot of suffering and struggle and we have to go through that. But it showed that if you want to have a good life, a happy life - whatever happy is - we have to work at it. All those figures in the exhibit looked so alone. Even the group of construction workers having lunch paid no attention to each other. There wasn't any sense of community there at all. That was what was so shocking!"

Another very important experience that has left its mark on us, was attending the performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. This was a first for many of us and full of the unexpected. "I was really surprised. I expected a man to be conducting, but when I got there it was a woman and she was wonderful! You could see every facial expression from where we sat. She was very soft and every gesture was soft. It was a pleasure for her to do that. It was her job I guarantee, but it was more than a job. It was life-giving. She gave." Somehow to watch this woman did something extraordinary to us. She was so encouraging! It was just like she was dancing.

One of the women said, "I remember when we were asked if we wanted to go, I kept saying 'It's not my thing'. But I think it was more of a fear that I was nervous that I wouldn't appreciate the music because it wasn't what I was brought up with. I didn't have an appreciation of classical music. This seems to be more of a middle class family experience. I was

more worried about not fitting in than I actually was about enjoying the music." That is part of what is behind the trips we take as a Women's Group. Some of these things cost money but some of them don't (like the symphony that night) and it encourages us to go again. On the way home one of the women said that for awhile she really concentrated hard on the music and then she couldn't keep it up. So she sat back and just let it "wash over her". It was such a wonderful expression. It meant so much to her. As a single parent with two children and a new baby, she had been finding life very hard. The symphony calmed her and for a short time, she could let things go. Others had also been surprised to find that in the midst of the turmoil they were in, this was a way to let things go. It was as though in these moments there was a way to get in touch with some inner calmness and peace.

Women under pressure

A very important part of our work together is looking at particular concerns of women, learning more about ourselves and why women are under such pressure in our society, educating ourselves and the community, and taking actions. We have had many sessions on violence against women that have been both heavy and helpful.

We talked about why we think the violence happens and have looked at the effects of T.V., newspapers and advertising. We have seen what a powerful effect this has on

encouraging violence against women and bad images of women. We have talked with women who work in Women's Shelters to understand the new stalking law and to look more closely at why it is so hard for women to get out of abusive situations. We invited the local police to come to our group to discuss how they deal with domestic violence and to share our concerns about inadequate protection for women. It has helped us to understand how big the job is and that we have to work at solutions together.

We have looked for ways to broaden the understanding in the community about the causes of the increasing violence against women through animating discussions in the Community Lunch program where families, men and women, gather weekly. Each year we have had a memorial service of the Montreal Massacre and this past year on Dec. 6, the Women's Group planned a remembrance for this gathering. Candles were extinguished with the naming of the 14 women victims followed by an invitation for people to come forward to extinguish other candles in memory of women friends or relatives who were victims. It was a very profound and moving event, with men choosing to come forward as well. It ended with us all going outside to release 125 white helium balloons with messages of hope for a better, safer world for women and our children. The Women's Group has taken a leadership role in the community that is beginning to have very important effects on ourselves and others.

Standing against abuse

Many of the women were involved in the action we took to support a woman who had been sexually abused by a doctor in a local clinic. Louise had talked to Faye about her experience and then had agreed to share it with the rest of the group in the hopes that we could help her to deal with it. Many of us have been victims of abuse, but this situation had a more public dimension about it. We shared other experiences, our powerlessness as poor women when dealing with the medical profession, and also our fears, that as mothers of young girls, this could also happen to our daughters. We decided to act! So Louise made an appointment with the clinic director without saying that she would be coming with friends. Six women gathered that morning, some with babies in carriages, to accompany her as support. We walked through the streets with a determination that was so evident that people we passed by asked us what we were up to. It was a difficult encounter that left us shaking after a very volatile discussion with the male director who insisted that Louise had "misunderstood". Nevertheless, we left knowing that we had won something important. We had moved from the shame and anger of the first discussion to the place where, together, we had been able to stand up and name the abuser. We had taken charge and been empowered by our action.

This has remained a powerful memory of collective action that has had effects even beyond our group. The story has

been told widely in the community and is one of those touchstone experiences that help us to find courage to act in other situations.

Women Against Contamination (WAC)

We have frequently discussed the very high incidence of allergies, asthma, respiratory problems and learning disabilities of children in our community and the fact that studies indicate these are much more serious than in other communities. We are also very concerned by the reports of 40 properties in the Point that have been identified as having dangerous levels of soil pollution when testing was done prior to new construction. Half of these properties have been decontaminated, but there has been no testing of the ground around the homes beside these contaminated areas or in the rest of the community. The City of Montreal discovered that one of the playgrounds is on contaminated land and their solution was just to remove the sandbox from the park. The Lachine Canal that runs along the Point has been the object of studies that have cost millions of dollars, as the Federal Government has explored possible ways to decontaminate these waters so that the area could be used as a recreation canal for outsiders.

After months of discussion about the possible connection between illness and pollution, in 1993 the Women's Group decided to form a sub-committee, the Women Against

Contamination (W.A.C.) to study this problem. In spite of all the fears of what we might find, we had to know the truth. It was a big decision to make. For the past 2 years we have been learning together to do research on contamination and to interpret studies that have been done. At one time the Point was the most highly industrialized area in Canada and for more than a century, factories have dumped their waste directly into the ground and by way of underground rivers, into the Lachine Canal. In all the studies that have been done, no one has bothered to look at the health affects of this contamination on the people in our community. We have met brick walls frequently as the different levels of government have made it clear that they feel we have no right to see the results of their testing. It is like opening a can of worms that no one wants us to look into.

We convinced the local community clinic of the importance of our concerns and they are now working with us. An epidemiologist from McGill is helping us learn about contaminants and testing procedures that can be used. We have developed a Project to start testing our children for the presence of lead, mercury, arsenic, cadmium, etc. A very crucial aspect of this work is the committee's determination to learn all they can about the problem and be included in every step of the study and research. We have delved into areas we are completely ignorant about and have been so grateful for the patient support of some experts in the field

that are helping us to understand. Taking on this responsibility has increased our confidence in ourselves and our determination that the lives of people in our community be respected.

In addition, we have found a heightened awareness in the community of environmental concerns. We are all talking of articles on contamination in the newspapers, studies done on the regional high school that was just closed because of unhealthy air, old dumping sites people remember and new information on asthma and allergies. It is like the stone in the pool that has sent out ripples throughout the community.

As one woman said, "I think that people thought that when we started to talk about W.A.C. it was just one of our whims and maybe we would just talk about it, but that was as far as it would go. But it has really got off the ground and everybody thinks that it is very important. We are really going to do something."

We are about change

A lot is happening in our Women' Group, but we also have some frustrations about not accomplishing all that we would like to do.

We feel that there are many more women that we should be reaching through our activities because there are such high needs in the community. We have also found that if a woman

finds a job, she loses the support of the group. We have started a group in the evenings once a month, but it is not enough and the women don't really feel a part of the group. We had also hoped that responsibility for our sessions would be more shared than it is, but that is a goal that Myrna and Faye (the animators) have had to let go of. For many of us, there are too many pressures already to take on another responsibility in the group. Free space is often what is needed most and we understand that. However, for special events, such as animation on topics in the Community Lunch Program, there has been a wonderful sharing and participation. On these occasions some women surprise themselves with unexpected gifts as speakers and leaders.

We are a group that is about change - change in ourselves, in relationships within our families and for women in the community. When we talked about how we ourselves had changed through the group, there were some wonderful stories of new life and often courageous new steps.

One woman who shared her story, spoke of how it had been so difficult for her to go out of the house. With the help of the group she had been able to share many of her problems, find new ways to be involved as a volunteer in the community, participated in the Worship Group and eventually took responsibility for the Collective Kitchens. She discovered new skills and ways to share them with others. She said; "For me, the group brought me out because I never went out

before. Now I am out instead of being home all the time. That is what the group has done for me."

Another woman spoke up and said; "I think the big thing for me through the group was to find out that it was alright for me to need help and to seek out professional help for my problems. I would never have gone otherwise. But the group used to say that it is okay to get help and there is nothing wrong with that. It has been almost a year now that I have been going to a counsellor and it took many years to get to that place. I don't know if I ever would have gone on my own. I would like to think I would have, but I doubt it very much. I was always worried about it being a put-down, but the group never saw it as that and have been very supportive with me. It was a big thing that I took that step."

"I would not let anybody look after my baby before. But now, coming here I have found out that it is alright to leave my children with someone. Now I am able to do that. They are still upset when I leave, but it has been good for us."

Changes within our community

When we talked about what affect the group had on the community, someone piped in, "Let's talk about our partners!"

That got a real good laugh and then we started to look at what changes there had been. One woman said that "Before coming here I had the kids and I had my husband.- (Great gales of laughter!) - I was always known as his wife or their mother

and I didn't know who I was. Now I know and even though I am still learning, I realize that I have my own identity. Now I make my own decisions about things that are going on in my life. Just because I have a husband doesn't necessarily mean I can't do my own things too. But for my husband it was 'Not that Women's Group again!' He used to encourage me to make my own decisions but when I started doing it he had mixed feelings. He was so used to me being one way, and then he saw me starting to change." There were a few partners who were quite angry with the group and really let us know it. It wasn't always easy for some women to participate.

We raised the question about what effect we have had as a group, on the community and named some of the small changes we had brought about. Although we have animated some very important discussions in community groups about roles of women, violence against women, the effect of the Social Reform Policy on women, worked with francophone women's groups to develop working goals, and participated in community actions, we did not feel we had accomplished enough. We were very confident of the effect on ourselves, our families and children, but the larger community seemed to be hard to measure.

Our celebration each year of International Women's Day on March 8 has been a very important time to look at the struggles and goals of women in the Point. There have been about 100 women from the community and sometimes women invited

from nearby Kahnawake (a native reserve) and anti-poverty groups. We have shared food together and spoken of all the battles women have won over the years and in many different countries. Our theme one year was "Women on the Move" and we were encouraged, energized and even more ready to hang in after listening to women's stories and seeing how far we had come.

The "bent-over woman"

Over the years we have so often spoken of the story of Jesus healing the "bent-over woman" as we have discussed the struggles of women in our community. In the light of our writing about the actions and struggle of women, we decided to turn once again to this passage.

One Sabbath Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. A woman there had an evil spirit that had kept her sick for eighteen years: she was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called out to her, 'Woman, you are free from your sickness' He placed his hands on her, and at once she straightened herself up and praised God. - Luke 13: 10-13

Donna commented that "the first thing I noticed was that Jesus called her. Usually it was people going to Jesus and asking for healing, but this time he actually called her out, even though she didn't ask for it. She had carried this burden for so long and as I think of the Women's Discussion group, I was thinking about how it takes some women so long to work through or try to bring about changes at home. It took me a few years of going to the group before I could actually find

the confidence to stand up and say 'I have a life too and I can do what I want too! I can make my own decisions too. But it took a while to change my attitudes and my way of thinking, and to build confidence. It is not something that comes overnight."

Myrna added that "it takes the support of other women to help you to know that it is alright to stand up for what you really believe in."

Faye commented that "It is so often someone else that says something that connects with what we are dealing with. In that sense it is like in this passage where Jesus calls out to the woman. I think that happens a lot in the Women's Discussion group. There are women that do not necessarily come because they want to get stronger, but maybe just to get out of the house. But then sometimes people's comments will help them change."

We spoke of ways in which people have called each other out and that for us, those words "woman you are free from your illness" were like someone saying "yes, you can do it."

Elizabeth responded; "It is like we were the bent-over women over all those years and all of a sudden - but it wasn't really all of a sudden - you finally get there."

Myrna said; "I don't think we realize ourselves all the changes that have happened, because it is such a long struggle. Sometimes we don't see it for ourselves unless someone points it out. I know it is a crazy thing to use, but

it is like you finally see the light. You don't see it and then all of a sudden it makes sense and things fall into place. There is still going to be continuous struggle and hard work, but you are not all the way back where you were. You know that you have to keep going."

When we talked about the devastating response of the synagogue leaders to the healing of the bent over woman, we wondered why they were so upset about what happened and what they had to lose.

The Official of the synagogue was angry that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, so he spoke up and said to the people, "There are six days in which we could work; so come during those days and be healed, but not on the Sabbath!" The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Any one of you would untie his ox or donkey from the stall and take it out to give it water on the Sabbath. Now here is this descendant of Abraham whom Satan has kept bound up for eighteen years; should she not be released on the Sabbath?" His answer made his enemies ashamed of themselves, while the people rejoiced over all the wonderful things that he did. - Luke 13: 14-17

Donna connected their resistance to discussions in the Women's Group about how women are afraid to rock the boat. "Because if one person changes, everyone else has to change along with it. What I do, affects my family. So for the officials around this woman, it was like Jesus had rocked the boat and they wanted an excuse to have something against Jesus again."

Melissa said; "It is like the people are trying to control the situation because she was standing up for herself. She was getting strength and they did not approve of that.

She was also getting attention, so they were trying to put her back in her place. It is like the Women's Group and the put-downs we get for going to it."

We thought about the women who were accused of being lesbians because they came to the group. The men who said that to the women didn't really believe it, but used it as a threat because they were feeling threatened. A lot of men like to control their women and women's groups challenge this. Changes that start in such groups are carried into their homes too.

Faye commented; "I found the words 'bound up' very hard. It is an awful phrase. It doesn't sound as though it is just by chance, but that something has been done and she has been bound up."

"I think she was a hooker", Melissa said. "It is like the bounding you would have from your pimp, but when you are freed then it is like you are really free. It is not like she was hurt or had sickness. In those days the biggest sin you could have was being an adulteress or a hooker. She didn't lead the right life in their eyes. I took the "bent over" as meaning being pressured by life. It sounded to me that the devil controls her spirit, but it is not the devil that makes you sick. Life makes you sick. I can relate to this passage pressure-wise. Being poverty-stricken is pressure enough."

Myrna felt that there was so much in this passage and she didn't see it as "a miracle passage in the sense of Jesus

saying 'woman you are free' and all of a sudden she is healed. I don't know what this bent-over woman looked like, but I think it was the burden and the heavy weight of everyday life. When Jesus said that she would be free it doesn't mean that she would be just carefree. The struggle would continue because she would have to go on living with whatever that burden was."

That is what it is like in our community and Elizabeth said; "It is like the bent-over woman was lowered. It is like people here in our community who are put in a lower category. The freedom comes in helping each other to stand up straight."

POINT AT WORK (P.A.W.)

I think the fact that we have come this far and have put in so much of our time and energy and ourselves, is what keeps me going. We have all given a part of our life together and I could not come to the place where I would say it is over. But I am not saying it is not frustrating not having a pay and not yet seeing our goals being fulfilled.

- Melissa

The upholstery project, P.A.W., is in serious financial difficulty and the group is trying to assess what the next step will be. We offer our reflections on what it is like to develop a vision of fair work, to seek to create and offer something of lasting value to our community, to be determined to find a way to create employment in the face of increasing joblessness, and to find that we are not succeeding.

The idea for P.A.W. came out of the Women's Discussion

Group as we spoke of our vision of a better community. We spent a whole session talking about a factory that would produce something of value for the Point, would provide work that brought dignity, paid decent wages and allowed the workers to share responsibility while learning together. We wanted it to go further than just wishful thinking and the Staff of Saint Columba House took the decision to make it a priority to start a work collective. The 26 week government Job Development Projects that went nowhere had been very discouraging and we were determined to create employment through a worker's co-operative.

Unemployed people in the community, interested in a job creation project, began to meet together to discuss possibilities. The "Rent-a-Hand" job bank was started and others looked at the feasibility of a work co-op such as upholstery, minor electrical repairs, woodworking, transportation or home repairs. After many months of research, the decision was made to begin the reupholstery project which we hoped would provide training in a trade, create jobs and help those on low-income have good-looking furniture, subsidizing work for them through outside contracts. Although there were men involved in the original committee, they did not choose to stay on when the Point at Work (P.A.W.) project began in the fall of 1989.

Sharing tools

Six women started the co-operative and we committed ourselves to a certain number of volunteer hours each month to learn the trade. We hired a teacher and paid her with any profits from our work. The first year was a real challenge, since we put in a lot of time and often received no pay. Sharing one set of tools between six women was an experience! Learning to accept each others' strengths and weaknesses was enlightening but also frustrating. But we were learning, transforming furniture that was sometimes brought in off the streets and taking responsibility for the management of our own co-op. We sought out donations of material from fabric companies, received donations of tools and a great second-hand industrial sewing machine from the company where our instructor worked.

The goals for our co-operative were (1) to provide stable employment, (2) to do something that was creative and of value and (3) to provide a service to our community that would particularly help those who had very little money.

Now, six years later, there are 4 of the same original 6 women working in the co-operative. We looked back at what motivated us to get involved originally and were surprised to find how different our expectations had been. For both Barbara and Shirley, the motivation was to learn how to do upholstery as a trade, but they were not counting on it for a permanent job.

Donna had been on the original planning committee and recalled; "I got involved because I thought it sounded really neat, something new and different. Upholstery seemed the logical choice. I was looking for a job and something to do with your hands really interested me."

Melissa recalls that she had applied for a job in "Working Out", a 26 week Job Development Project at Saint Columba House, and was asked if she got the job would she be willing to help to co-ordinate the new upholstery project. In her usual frank, direct way, Melissa said; "So what was I going to say? - no? Of course I didn't. That was in September before it got off the ground, but everything was already formed as to how it was going to start. That is how I got involved. I had to be willing to work in upholstery if I took the "Working Out" job. Of course I said yes. It was like you had no choice. It is never a project I would have chosen. There are too many other needs in the community such as clothing or a food co-operative that I would have chosen over upholstery. Even though it was a goal to help the poor people in the area, it was still too expensive for them. My friend Louina, who has been our instructor, was an upholsterer then and I knew how expensive the work was. I didn't understand how we could lower the prices enough for people here. But after I was in it, I enjoyed the co-operative and really wanted to see it get off the ground. By that time I was in it for my own self and the job aspect was very

important."

Sandra and Diane started because they wanted jobs. They enjoyed learning upholstery but it was more for the employment. Both of them had to leave the co-operative after three years, because of P.A.W.'s financial instability. Often pays would be weeks late because there wasn't sufficient revenue after all the bills were paid and their families could no longer survive without a more steady income. It was a real blow to lose them!

Managing the business

We have gone through many stages during our six year history, from our volunteer year at the beginning, to receiving federal funding to pay salaries and a full-time teacher for 8 months. We have used job training funds to learn about co-op development, business management, wood refinishing and even had an ergonomist who worked with us to ensure that we were not abusing our bodies through bad work habits or conditions. From the beginning we have been committed to helping each person learn all aspects of the business instead of dividing up the tasks. Maybe it wasn't realistic to think that everybody should learn everything and we should have specialized a bit earlier. We have all been laid off at one time or another but have continued to work as volunteers during these periods to keep the co-op going. We have given a lot of ourselves.

When we received the government funding, we had to make a crucial decision, whether we would hire a project manager to train us in the business aspects or an upholstery teacher to learn the trade. We opted for the upholstery teacher, because this is a profession that takes so long to learn. We learned all aspects of the trade, stripping furniture down to the base and building it back up with springs, stuffing and covering. This was great for developing our skills, but we had serious lacks in the business management side of the co-op. We are really paying for this now. We were all so keen on becoming better upholsterers and none of us wanted to take on the management of the project.

Melissa has recently taken on the responsibility of coordinator and has received extra training in business management. But that was not an easy decision. Melissa says that she "didn't want to take on manager at first. I was reluctant to take on the work because we all know each other very well and I didn't want to be hassled. I never take myself as being in charge though. I should have been doing the management a lot earlier and the work with the consultant is really helping us."

The question "If we had it to do over again.....?" brought out a lot of suggestions. Some felt that we would have done better if we had started with the planning and business training early on so that when we got into the upholstery work we would understand what we were up against.

Others said that if that is how it was started, they probably would never have got involved or stuck it out. They wanted to learn a trade and produce work as soon as possible. However, if we were advising another co-operative, we would suggest that it would be beneficial to take the time to see how other similar businesses work and learn from them.

We feel that the way we approached the project may have been due to us being women. Without prior experience in business, it would have been hard for us to believe we could start off on our own. We all said that even though we may have dreamed of it, we would have been afraid to take the steps to start our own business. Instead we chose to get into the actual upholstery work, get really involved in it and then work to make it a long-term job.

We looked at the fact that what we did is very common for women. We were asked to come in, learn something and volunteer some time. How many times do women do this? Interestingly enough, the men in the original group were not willing to do that. They wanted to see a job tomorrow or to be more assured that as a business it was going to work.

We still all agreed that to start a co-op you would have to be willing to put in a lot of volunteer time. However, now we would start differently. We realize that if it is necessary to take extra courses, it would have to be in the evening on our own time. We would leave production-line time for production. We have always been very supportive of each

other being involved in other important activities in the building, taking time off for our children when necessary and participating in community meetings that dealt with more than the running of the co-op. This has been very important for us all, but it certainly doesn't help a business make it.

Our goals are hard to reach

The biggest disappointment has been the inability to continue to offer reupholstery to people in the community who have little money and this has been a hard, ongoing discussion.

Melissa said; "That was one of the things that kept me going with Reupholstery. We were going to reach the poor - people that really needed it. That was what kept me on and now, that is not what is happening. We have known we haven't been able to do this for the last couple of years. There are people here who really could use the furniture, but there is no way we will ever be able to reach them, unless we could do it for nothing. These are people that get their furniture out of the alleys. There are many, many families in the Point that need our service but could never pay even our "fixed-income" price for it. We have helped some fire victims and we use donated material to keep the price as low as possible for those on welfare and low incomes, but I just feel that our Upholstery project cannot help the poor. We reach people on low-incomes, to redo kitchen chairs, etc. - but not the poor."

Elizabeth tried to be encouraging and said; "I know that is not your main goal, but maybe it is a start."

"But we are getting further away from our goal though", Melissa replied. Before we used to do work at very low prices and take the losses. I argued with the instructor in the Business Course that we didn't want to charge \$20/hr. to cover salaries and expenses. He said that it wouldn't work, but I said it was important for us to offer it at a price people could pay. But then we realized that we can't make a living like this. So we started raising prices. It seems like we are getting further and further away from our goal, not getting closer. I need a job and the money is important. But to feel good about myself I want more than a job and more than a salary. I want to be able to do something for people. That has always been important for me. Not that I have a lot better than them, but I have more than a lot of people."

We began to point out how much they had learned, the beautiful furniture they produce and the fact that their co-operative has really been important to the community as an example of self-employment. Myrna went on to say how sad she has felt about the difficulties they have been having "after all the hard work, the time and all the effort that people put into it. You have worked very hard. I am sad that there are aspects of it that you are unhappy with, but like everything else, maybe something will happen that will give you inspiration."

Melissa shared her frustration, but was determined to deal with the reality they faced as she pointed out that "it takes more than just wanting it to work. I think we need to get stabilized as a company. We are just realizing that now. As a company we have to have stable employment and that should have been our first goal. Then we would be able to offer services to very low-income people. For the last few years we have been trying to do both - the employment and making the business good, as well as offering our services. I think we have to be stable before we can do that and that is what is hard to face."

Faye mentioned other factors that are producing problems for the co-operative and said; "Donna, you talked about your daughter's economics class example of a guy who was trying to make a business profitable by cutting back workers. What you have also been trying to do is to be fair and supportive to each other in a co-operative. You have been respecting people's gifts and their lack of gifts, as well as not making a profit from people who can't afford it. What you are up against is a business world that is set up differently. So I think that this does not mean that you give up all your goals, but don't blame yourself for your failure to reach them all. That doesn't mean that just feeling good about having ideals is going to put bread on the table or make the business work. What you are up against is a world in which the labour market can charge lower wages than people can live on, concentrate on

high production and let somebody off with no notice if they find they are not productive enough."

We agreed that the time had come to consolidate the business, to not let go of our goal to serve the community, but to see that as a longer term objective. We were reminded that the same thing happened to the Point Adult Centre for Education whose goal was to do more challenging popular education work from the beginning. At the start, with all the struggle to keep it alive, that goal had to be put on hold. Now, 8 years later, the time has come to start getting into the kind of education P.A.C.E. wanted to do from the beginning.

Learning, growing and changing

Throughout six years of working together, we have seen changes in each other as a result of the P.A.W. project. We all are very proud of the furniture we transform and know from happy customers that we really have developed our creative skills. But beyond that, our work has had other effects on us and how we feel about ourselves. To be able to speak so straightforwardly about our own feelings and progress was a major step in itself.

When we asked what changes we had experienced, we were pleasantly surprised that Shirley spoke up right away to say; "Sometimes I am a little quiet, but I speak up more now. Before I was so quiet and kept my feelings inside all the

time. I never like to hurt people's feeling, but I have learned to speak up. But sometimes I think I am a bit hard now." We assured Shirley how much better it is for everyone now that she says what is on her mind. She is more independent than she was and takes more chances on her own.

Melissa, in her direct, assertive way said; "I'm stronger, much stronger in speaking my mind. Believe it or not I don't always speak my mind. Just standing up for myself - my rights, my own personal respect for myself, I have changed a lot. I don't take B.S. from a lot of people I would have taken it from before. I feel more important now because I am able to make decisions. My job downstairs (P.A.W. is located in the basement of Saint Columba House) has played a major role in that. I think of my job as having control, not over people, but over what is happening. I feel responsible for myself and my own actions. It has changed me a lot. There are things I'll always carry with me from what I have learned downstairs, but I'd like to see myself progress to something else."

Donna very quietly replied; "I am slowly learning to be independent. I feel as a person I am stronger, in the sense that I feel I am capable of doing things now. I may not be as hesitant to try something new, even though new things still scare me. I have learned a lot about my community and find that I am into a lot more now. With the women downstairs, we are learning to get along and learning how to cope with each

other's differences. It is also not being afraid to take some chances - safe chances."

Barbara did not really see changes in herself and feels that she has always been able to be very straightforward. But Melissa expressed concern that Barbara had changed. "I love Barbara, but I find her tired now. She comes in tired and it takes everything out of her now. You have had a lot of things happen to you in the last year and that doesn't help. You haven't had time to rest." Barbara agreed with what was said, thought about it over the following weeks and she made an important decision to cut back on her work with P.A.W.

In spite of all the hard work, the weeks without pay and the constant pressure of whether we will be able to carry on, we have learned and grown together. We have created jobs for ourselves and we are in control of our business. As Melissa said, "Where else could you work for 8 hours a day and have the fun we do? Really! We support each other. We may have our little differences, but as soon as we know one of the others is in trouble, we help out. It is like having your own support group there all the time."

The impact of commitment

It has been difficult to see whether the project has had an impact on the community apart from the actual furniture that many have had upholstered. We realized that people in the community seldom get the chance to hear how the co-op works

and what its goals are. After a presentation of their work at a Community Lunch program, people were surprised to learn that it was our own business. They thought we were hired and working for Saint Columba House. So the story needs to be told more often.

Faye spoke of the impact of their work on the many, many visitors from other communities, congregations, outreach ministries and even other countries such as Mexico, Zambia and Peru. "All these groups that come to see you, go away with a tremendous amount of energy and hope. They see, as I do, what deep commitment it takes to hang in there year after year, determined to make a go of it for both yourselves and the community. I have been aware as I have worked with you over the years, how tough it has been and how discouraging it has been financially. The work is so physically demanding and we all have been surprised at how long it takes to learn all the skills needed, but you have done it. Your work is valuable, your commitment is really an act of faith, and for those who can see this, you are a sign of hope."

CHAPTER FOUR

HOPE - the core of the shift from "Margin to Centre"

Hope is a big word. It is always hope that keeps you going. So hope is the good word. In the struggles you are going to face, it is hope that keeps you going.

- Myrna

In Point St. Charles we are confronted daily with the effects of poverty, the lack of education, high unemployment, isolation, domestic abuse and the deep anxiety that the future may not be any better for our children. As a group of women from "the Point", we have spent many years working with others to change the living conditions in our community and we have come together to talk about what helps us hang in as the times get harder and harder.

In a small Biblical worship/reflection group, we see this work through new eyes and seek to understand what brings hope or new energy in the struggle. The starting point of our worship is the concerns of our community, the projects we are involved in, the pressures that we are facing and the light that breaks through from time to time. We use a scripture reading to focus our questions and push us to deeper understandings of both our task and God's participation with us.

A few years ago, the "Women's Discussion Group" of Saint Columba House, spent a number of weeks discussing their vision of what they would like their community to be. We spoke of

our dream to have schools in our community, for both adults and children, of good affordable housing and enough nutritious food in each home. We spoke of a factory which would produce something of value for the community. We constructed a large collage together (that still hangs in our meeting room), working with scraps of material to build this new community as we spoke of our goals. Our discussion was like Isaiah's prophetic vision as he spoke of the emergence of a new society:

My people.....will build houses and get to live in them - they will not be used by someone else. They will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine - it will not be drunk by others. Like trees, my people will live long lives. They will fully enjoy the things that they have worked for.....and their children will not meet with disaster. - Isaiah 65: 21-23

Our Women's Group was not dreaming "in technicolour". Our vision was both simple and profound, rooted in the ordinary, everyday needs of our community. We were not content to leave this vision as a dream, but, during the following weeks, months and years we have continued to work, in spite of enormous obstacles, to change conditions in our community and to offer a ray of hope.

The Worship Group has moved towards a very concrete understanding of how God works to free people through sharing, advocacy, education and action for social change. Our reading of scripture repeatedly breaks open the text in new ways with the intuitive identification with the powerless in any story or encounter. It has been a gradual process for us to feel

confident in the significance of our own interpretations and it has been tough to let go of deeply-rooted beliefs in an all-powerful, judgemental, male God. But as Myrna has said, "It was a lot easier when I believed there were right or wrong answers and I kept hoping for the miracle that was going to make everything alright. But once your eyes are opened, there's no turning back!"

As we have named the powerful forces that continue to destroy families and community, we have found in the Bible, particularly in the actions and parables of Jesus, new understandings of God's struggle on the side of the poor throughout history. As this awareness has grown, we have wanted to find ways to reach out beyond our small group, to openly share and involve others in making their faith address the real questions that are being asked.

We began to talk of possible ways we could express through some symbol the connections between our work for social change and the gospel. We decided to make a banner for our Main Hall in Saint Columba House and invited a number of the groups from our centre to participate in making it. Each group was asked to symbolize the essence of their work on brightly coloured burlap rectangles. We explained that we would sew the pieces as background around the outline of a cross embroidered on a large fabric banner.

The results exceeded all our expectations! Each rectangle is a story in itself and their creation provoked

much discussion about the goals and visions of the groups. They symbolize many of the voices, the stories and the struggles we have lived through together. We will share a few of these stories that capture some of the theological insights we have had.

The widow and the judge

When the School Board threatened to close the only English Protestant elementary school in our neighbourhood in 1985, a group of parents gathered to fight back. After unbelievable bureaucratic opposition the Point Adult Centre for Education (P.A.C.E.) was started by a group of community women to make fuller use of the school. The small, volunteer committee of women, who themselves have no post-secondary education, continue to administer and fight to keep the adult centre open for the over 200 people who are taking courses.

The logo of the education centre is a woman carrying a protest placard with "P.A.C.E." on it and this has become a powerful symbol of hope for those in the community who so desperately want education that relates to their everyday needs. Their logo on the banner represents years of struggle for social change.

The day we discussed the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, Donna, who is one of the most gentle, fighting members of P.A.C.E., said, "That's us! We keep coming, pleading for our rights, until we wear them down at the school

board."

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to teach them that they should always pray and never become discouraged. "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected anyone. And there was a widow in that same town who kept coming to him and pleading for her rights, saying, 'Help me against my opponent!' For a long time the judge refused to act, but at last he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or respect anyone, yet because of all the trouble this widow is giving me, I will see to it that she gets her rights. If I don't, she will keep on coming and finally wear me out.'" - Luke 18: 1-5

We marvelled at how this widow, who had so few rights and was the most vulnerable in biblical times, could ever have known that she should fight for her rights. She somehow knew that she as a woman had value, in spite of what society told her and she found the courage to stand up against injustice. This was a powerful act of faith for us and a breakthrough in understanding the meaning of this parable that could help us "to pray and not be discouraged". We knew what it was like to go before the authorities (such as the School Board or welfare bureaucrats) to fight for our rights and be repeatedly dismissed. There was no question raised in the parable about whether she was in the right, but the struggle to receive justice was a long battle. This determination and faith is the point of Jesus' message. Most Bible commentaries focus on the comparison of the unjust judge and a just God, missing the heart of this story of courage.

The woman who was bleeding

Hours of talk and hard work went into the Women's Discussion Group symbol. We made tiny women figures out of scraps of material, much like the *arpillera* from Chile that hangs over Faye's desk. These figures are arranged around a coffee table and one woman is embracing another, who is bent over in tears. Above them are colourful strips forming a rainbow, which symbolizes our hopes and dreams. On the rainbow are symbols of many things we have discussed and shared, such as love, children, sex, cooking, money and education.

The tears, the comfort and the vision come together in one tough story. The Women's Group together had dealt with the sexually abusive actions of a local doctor. The scripture passage that seemed to reflect this for us was about the woman who was bleeding:

As Jesus went along, the people were crowding him from every side. Among them was a woman who had suffered from severe bleeding for twelve years; she had spent all she had on doctors, but no one had been able to cure her. She came up in the crowd behind Jesus and touched the edge of his cloak, and her bleeding stopped at once. Jesus asked, "Who touched me?"

Everyone denied it, and Peter said, "Master, the people are all around you and crowding in on you."

But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I knew it when power went out of me." The woman saw that she had been found out, so she came trembling and threw herself at Jesus' feet. There in front of everybody, she told him why she had touched him and how she had been healed at once. Jesus said to her, "My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." - Luke 8: 43-48

When we discussed this passage in worship, we spoke of how women were made to feel unclean and how male-structured taboos isolated and condemned them. The group marvelled at the woman's courage to venture into the crowd in spite of the tradition that kept her isolated, judging her to be unclean because of her flow of blood. We spoke of the powerful faith that enabled her, a woman alone, to take action to rid herself of her affliction. We recalled that the group of women who confronted the medical director about sexual abuse did not use the same language, but their act was a similar step towards taking charge of their bodies and reaching out for healing. They too were the victims of a gender and class hierarchy that often controlled and abused them. Collectively the group of women had been able to name the fear that trapped them and how powerless they felt. They too, found the courage to take a step towards changing that and in their action there was a healing power. "Your faith has made you well."

The workers in the vineyard

Point At Work (P.A.W.), the reupholstery co-operative, made a piece for the banner that shows miniature examples of the work they are doing now, but doesn't show the struggle it has been, the risks they have taken and how hard it is to often go without pay.

Two of the women upholsterers participated in the Worship Group's difficult discussion of the parable of the workers in

the vineyard.

The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the marketplace at nine o'clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, so he told them, 'You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage. Then at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the market-place and saw some other men still standing there. 'Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' he asked them. 'No one hired us' they answered. 'Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard,' he told them.

When evening came, the owner told his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.' The men who had begun to work at five o'clock were paid a silver coin each. So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. They took their money and started grumbling against the employer.....'Listen, friend,' the owner answered one of them, I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin.'" - Matthew 20: 1-17

The women in the P.A.W. co-op struggle to create a different vision of how a business can be fair, while being very realistic about how hard it is to share equally when people work at different levels. We spoke of the powerful message of Jesus that people have a right to work and a fair day's wage that allows their families to live with dignity. But we know that is not how the business world functions today. It is an ongoing struggle for P.A.W. to charge enough for their labour to be able to survive on their salaries while at the same time, wanting to provide a service that people in

the community can afford on the very low incomes they have. It is a tough dilemma. It has also been a strong commitment in the cooperative that the women will share income equally, even if there is a difference in their productivity, since like in this Bible parable, they all need a fair day's wage to survive.

The line-ups in the marketplace still go on each day in Montreal, as the unemployed line up at 5 a.m. at Workshare offices hoping someone will come by for workers. This passage seems as relevant today as it must have been for all those people that listened to Jesus that day. Our commitment that each worker must have their basic needs met, has also been the theological basis of the salary parity policy for staff at Saint Columba House and has had a powerful impact on our understanding of shared responsibility.

The Christ in our midst

Other groups created symbols representing the many stories of struggle and hope in the years of work for social change in our community. The Welfare Rights Committee depicted their work with a NO sign over Law 37, the regressive punitive Welfare Reform in Quebec. The Hot Lunch Program's happy portrayal of children eating together has been connected to Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 in which the resources at hand were distributed to provide enough for all. (Mark 6: 35-44)

The day came when all the pieces were gathered together and we began to arrange them around an outline of the cross. And then came an unexpected flash of insight. Melissa suggested, "Why don't we use the pieces themselves, to form the cross?" and she started to move them.

As the pieces were moved from the margin to the centre, forming the cross, we knew that it was right.

It was a very powerful moment as we realized the significance of what we had done. "Wow! That really says something!", one woman exclaimed. We had made a statement that the work of the people is the Christ in our midst - the ongoing presence of God in our suffering, pain, despair, joy and celebrations - the continuing struggle to build a more just community.

The creation of the banner was our naming of the Christ. It symbolizes for us that the work of the people has not only moved from the margins to the centre of the cross, but that the cross itself is at the heart of our work and reflection. This movement back and forth is the core of our understanding of the connection between the work of a community deeply committed to justice and our faith.

The banner hangs in our Main Hall in the midst of all the activities, organizing, community meals and meetings. It has become a focal point that has helped our Worship Group share with others our understanding of theology that comes out of our day-to-day experiences in the struggle for a more just

society.

The Canaanite woman

We are discovering in our community, the powerful resources to be found in the integration of women's struggles, the work for social change and the place of faith. This interrelation is most powerfully expressed through the Worship Group's discussion around the text of the Canaanite woman's confrontation with Jesus.

Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David!" she cried out. 'Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition.'

But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him. "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!"

Then Jesus replied, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel."

At this the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said.

Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

That's true , sir," she answered, "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their master's table."

So Jesus answered her, "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed.

- Matthew 15: 21-28

We did not like this passage at first. It was not just the difficulty in seeing Jesus being close-minded and lacking in compassion. We felt so connected to this woman who was an outsider, who was being ignored, whose behaviour was being criticized by the disciples as she was fighting for her child.

Donna spoke of how desperate the mother must have been to take such extreme measures. "She must have been so afraid and yet she had such courage. She had to face being laughed and shouted at, but she still hung in there. It is so like people who are misunderstood and shunned in our community."

Myrna was very troubled and said; "It feels too close to home for me. I remember how I was humiliated in front of my children at the welfare office. It is really hard to read that Jesus was putting her down too."

We marvelled that the Canaanite woman had shown such remarkable openness and courage as she had dared to look outside her own community and faith for help. She knew what was important and was willing to do anything for her child. Because she was so determined, this woman changed Jesus' mind. Jesus was turned around, converted, by this woman. We found new respect for this Jesus who could make mistakes, admit it and change.

Donna spoke of her new understanding of how much God needs us in the work of justice. "The way I see it now, it is the work and vision of ordinary people that God needs to turn people and the church around."

Jesus' teaching starts a riot

The Worship Group has continued to look for ways to reach out further in our community and we have begun to take some chances. Last Eastertime we decided that instead of having

our worship after the Community Lunch Program was finished, we would hold it as the animation time, right in the middle of the gathering of over 100 people (families with small children, couples and single people, both young and old). As we announced it was the time the babies could go to the child-care room, we also explained what we would be doing and invited people to stay to participate. We had expected a quick exodus, but almost everyone remained. Donna opened with prayer and then Myrna read the following scripture;

The whole group rose up and took Jesus before Pilate, where they began to accuse him: 'We caught this man misleading our people, telling them not to pay taxes to the Emperor and claiming that he himself is the Messiah, a king.'

Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'

'So you say,' answered Jesus.

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds. 'I find no reason to condemn this man.'

But they insisted even more strongly. 'With his teaching he is starting a riot among the people all through Judea. He began in Galilee and now has come here.' - Luke 23: 1-5

We looked at the complaint that Jesus "with his teaching is starting a riot among the people all through Judea... and now he has come here." Faye asked the people what this sounds like in our community and the responses came from all sides. People spoke of the G.S.T. (Goods & Services Tax) and how unfair it is to poor people. Another reminded us that we have to keep stirring people up now to fight for our rights or we would have nothing to live on. Others talked of how some of us are called troublemakers today and why people try to silence us. People were amazed that what they said was

important and that others listened. It was a very moving time in which we could really understand in new ways what impact Jesus' teaching about a just society had both then and now. People talked about the Easter Service for a long time after and were very interested in how much the Bible passage related to how we live in our community and the struggles we have. So on special occasions, we have continued to make opportunities to continue this sharing with the larger community.

Hope in the darkness

The Christmas Worship during the Community Lunch Program began with the lighting of a candle as the symbol of hope in the darkness. We asked what that darkness was and people responded immediately: - "the government cutting back our welfare cheques again", "the lack of jobs and no hope of ever getting one", "the increasing number of people who don't have enough food", "the social reform that is all about saving money, not about helping people to get ahead" and "the rich are getting richer while those at the bottom have nothing".

We read the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46 - 55), spoke of the dark times then and asked how these words sound to us today:

Mary said,

"My heart praises the Lord; my soul is glad because of God my Saviour, for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!

From now on all people will call me happy, because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me.

His name is holy; from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honour him.

He has stretched out his mighty arm and

scattered the proud with all their plans.

He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands.

He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors, and has come to the help of his servant Israel.

He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham and to all his descendants for ever!" - Luke 1: 46-55

There were comments that none of these predictions had happened yet and that we live in a tough world. So the question was asked, "then where is the hope?" There was a long, heavy silence and then from different places all over the room, the voices were heard: - "There is news that there are the first steps towards peace in Ireland." "When I see someone in the community really caring and sharing what they have with someone else, that is hope." "P.A.C.E. is a place of hope for us - people are learning who never had a chance before." "People are coming here to have a hot meal together and to talk - that is like hope." "In the Middle East, Palestine and Israel are really talking - who would have thought that could happen?" As the comments came, Donna said afterwards that it was like seeing small little candles lighting up the darkness throughout the hall, until the whole place glowed!

It took ten years of meeting weekly for worship with a small group before we had built the base of understanding in the community that has allowed this more open sharing. This has given us new hope and energy for the struggle!

Sharing our message

We have also become more involved in sharing our stories and reflections with church people outside the Point. Myrna and Donna are discovering the very special gifts that they have to convey the gospel message from a very different perspective. As we have led discussions with church groups, theological students and a Lay Preacher's course, we have had to struggle to understand how connections can be made across class barriers and have found this to be quite a challenge.

Myrna, Donna and Faye were invited to give the theme presentation at an annual meeting of the Women's Presbyterial for the Montreal region churches. We joined the women for lunch and we happened to sit at a table with a group of "old Pointers", as they described themselves. They either were born in the Point or had lived here for many years. It was fascinating to sit with them and reminisce about different landmarks, places, people and to hear what it was like before we were born.

Our presentation was on the theme "From Margin to Centre". Faye did the introduction about our worship group and how we arrived at making the Banner. Myrna and Donna talked about the significance of the pieces that formed the banner, some stories they represented and how the worship group related scripture passages we had dealt with to the experiences of the community. We then told the story of how the pieces moved into the centre to form the cross on the

Banner and what an impact that had on us. As we unfurled the Banner there was a wonderful "Aah" and the feeling that they shared in understanding what this meant. Many women came up to us afterwards to ask about the banner and it seemed to have quite a powerful impact on them. Myrna felt that "it wasn't just the banner that amazed them, but that the symbols of our work form the cross. When we show it, I sometimes feel as overwhelmed as we were when we first put it together. When we see somebody looking at it, I hope they know what we felt when we made it and that it comes alive for them."

We asked the women present to discuss the passage of the gold coins together and we had a very lively exchange afterwards. We shared our struggle with this passage and how we read it as a critique of the context in Jesus' time and ours. We discussed our present socio-economic context and how this passage spoke to us.

Donna recounts that "I spoke about poverty, how hard it is to live on the little the government gives on U.I.C., welfare or minimum wage jobs. The reality is an everyday struggle to make ends meet. One woman from the assembly stood up and spoke about needing to have faith in God and all will be provided for. When I tried to explain that faith is not lost because a person worries about where the next meal comes from, I felt that my faith was being questioned. I feel that because I don't pray for miracles, that doesn't mean I don't believe in a Creator who is beside me in my struggles."

Donna closed our presentation by leading the group in prayer and it was the first time that she had prayed publicly. Her words were very powerful, simply stated, gentle and strong. Many commented on her gift and this has encouraged Donna to continue in other ways to lead in worship in our own community.

And so we meet, we talk, we pray, we challenge and we dig deep to find a way to speak collectively of the sources of hope we find in our unique community. The gospel message has come alive to us with new meaning and a powerful sense of God's presence in the midst of our struggling community. As we have talked and worshipped together, we have been changed and blessed.

CHAPTER 5

HOPE - Is it WORK?

- Work as a source or destroyer of Hope

Our discussion about Work opened up many questions about what we call work, why we work, the effect work has had on us and the motivation to work. Elizabeth spoke of her experience working at home and the effects of different kinds of work outside the home. Her story raises many of the questions all of us have about work.

"When I had three children and Peter was 9 months old, I took a job cleaning offices. My mother did it all her life and that's all she thought she could do. But when I was doing it I kept thinking, 'what am I doing here? I can do better than this. I know I can do better than cleaning other people's dirt. It's bad enough doing it at home. Why am I doing it for a living?"

"But the reason I did it was because I wanted to be home with the children during the day. I had them and I wanted to take care of them. So I went out during the night so my husband could be home with them at night while I was out cleaning. I was exhausted when I came home and I had to be up early with the kids every day. But I still felt that wasn't me. There was something better in life for me. There had to be. I didn't want to end up, like my mother did, with 35 years of cleaning offices. What got me out of it was being

laid off. Three months later I was asked to become a Teacher's Aid at my children's school and I think that is what started it all for me. I was working with P.A.C.E. before that, but I was still working cleaning offices then too. I think I was too exhausted to realize what P.A.C.E had meant to me at that point. I was really, really exhausted, but I knew there was more to life than that."

All of us have families and work as well, so the question of the relationship of our work to our families was very important. Donna chose to stay home with her children when they were young, even though financially they couldn't afford it. But as she looks back now, she realizes, "When I was home with Fred and the kids, I didn't know who I was. I was my parent's daughter, I was Fred's wife and our children's mother. It wasn't until I started being involved outside the home that I found there was a chance to find out who Donna is and the things she likes. Now I'm in the process of finding out who I am and to be me."

Although Elizabeth looked after her family and worked at the same time, she shared some of Donna's feelings. She liked being home with the family and even though she also was bringing in her salary, it was not enough. She says; "I didn't feel like I was contributing anything. I really was and I know I was, but at that point I didn't feel I was. I felt more dependent on my husband than I should have been. I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself. Now that I've been

working, I'm not the same." It is clear that for Elizabeth, it is not working in itself that produced the changes in her, but the type of work and volunteer work she became involved in. Recalling a recent encounter with her mother at the Adult Education Centre, Elizabeth said; "My mom comes over and says, 'You've come a long way and I'm proud of you.' I know I am 40 years old, but I can still make my Mom proud of me!"

For Melissa, the relationship between work and family is more complex. She says, "I work because I really find it hard staying home. I enjoy being home, but I really find it hard being there. I find staying home with the kids ten times harder than here at work. I do miss staying home with the children to be honest. I feel I cheat the kids when I'm not home. I enjoy my work, but I feel guilty working." The type of work is crucial and must provide a way for one's particular skills or gifts to be utilized in order for it to be valued.

Myrna spent 15 years at home with her five children before she started work as a cook at Saint Columba House and she says of that experience; "I found it very hard when I worked the Lunch Program here. I didn't really dislike it. It was a job. There's a difference. I'm not saying I hated it. It just wasn't rewarding. It is nice to have a job that is rewarding, or when you feel in your heart or your being, that you are doing the best you can." Even though there were rewards for us all, being home, we looked outside the home for the chance to fully utilize our abilities and feel a sense of

our own worth.

There is no consensus on the relation between salary and work. Although being paid for work done was appreciated by all, Faye was the only one who found that this was very important for her own self-worth. Money is not the motivating factor in our work now. As Melissa said, "Let's face it, I don't work just for the money, because I pay half of my salary out in babysitting costs." At the same time, Melissa is most emphatic about her need to have financial independence and control of how she chooses to spend her money within the family.

It seems that there has been a shift in how work is looked at, because of changing experience. Work that was "just a job", that is, simply brought in money, was not valued. When Myrna speaks of work, it is as though her paid employment is no longer classified as "work" because it is so fulfilling. It seems that underneath our discussion is the expectation that work will be tough and not enjoyable.

Myrna explained; "I don't know what I would do if I didn't work. My life is my work now. I really enjoy it. Work to me is - not work. To me it's everything - working with the people in "Hand in Hand", the Women's Group, the Worship Group. I love it! I guess what I'm trying to say is that my work is reversed. I feel like my work is at home now and my personal enjoyment is at work. Work is having to do the things you don't always want to do. Here (at Saint

Columba House) I am doing things that I never dreamed I would be able to do."

It is as though, when work becomes enjoyable, instead of a means to an end - survival, it is no longer seen as work. For Donna, work is tied to salary, of necessity. She says; "We need the money to survive. If Fred was working and we didn't need money, I would probably come in and do it anyway. But right now it means a lot to me to get paid. But I could look at it in another way. If I'm being paid to make something for someone, I take the money but still get pleasure out of it. I don't think of it as something that's a job. It's something I enjoy and it is the only way I can relate to upholstery. I put my whole being, my whole self in it. I take pride in it and I feel I can give something to someone else."

Melissa reacted very strongly to Donna's words and stated emphatically that it is very hard work. Donna acknowledged how tough the work is, but that even when she is tired and beat at the end of the day, she feels good about it. Although all the members of the co-operative feel the pressure of the uphill battle they are engaged in to succeed in a business in such tough times, because of different areas of responsibility in the Upholstery Project, they may feel the weight of this differently. Melissa, as co-ordinator of that project, is more involved with the management and has deep concerns about the future of the co-operative.

Melissa said; "I look at the work differently, because

it's such a struggle. The co-operative is a learning experience, but it is work because it's always a new struggle and new pressures. Sometimes I find that it is just too much. When I go home I'm exhausted, not from the upholstery, but the pressures we are under and the struggle the business has been under for so long. What is going to happen in the future is pressure, so it is like work. It is hard work and I look at it as work."

Work is seen as that which exhausts you, drains you, and takes away your energy. When "work", meaning one's employment, leaves you fulfilled and with a sense of accomplishment, then it is no longer regarded as work. The expectation is that work will sap you.

Families influenced our outlook

Faye suggested that it would be helpful to push further on our discussion of work, looking at how we formed our ideas about work, how work was seen in our families and whether our own experiences are changing this understanding.

Elizabeth said that she believed that "a lot of it comes from our parents. Work for me at the beginning was just work and that's it. I never found enjoyment in work and I didn't expect to. That's not how I was brought up. You go out to work and do it."

Donna commented; "I remember once I visited where my Father worked, but I was all dressed up and warned not to get

dirty. So that's what I concentrated on. It wasn't until years later that I found out exactly what he did. He was a carpenter and built sets for commercials. He didn't talk about it. He worked a lot and he worked 6 days a week for long hours. I don't ever remember him complaining about his work. I remember him complaining about the long hours, but not about the work itself. If anything, when I reflect back on my father and his attitude towards work, I could honestly say that he probably enjoyed it. I think it is where I get that from. My mother worked up until she got married and then my father preferred she stay at home. She never went back to work."

Faye commented that a lot of people say you have to work to have dignity and we discussed whether our parents' work give them dignity in any way.

Elizabeth's response was very emphatic. "No, my mother's work didn't. She was a cleaning lady. She didn't like it and did it because she had seven of us to bring up after she was divorced. So for her, work was just a need. She didn't like what she was doing and she often wanted to change it. She didn't have a great education and she felt that was all she could do. She often said to us that we were going to finish high school and then if we wanted to go on, we would discuss it. We never did really go on. She wanted better for us, this is what it was. I ended up cleaning offices for 9 years [at night] because I had kids and I wanted to stay home

during the day. So for me, that job was work. I hated it. But for the kids, you need money.

"My mother wanted us to get into something we enjoyed and something that was more worthwhile than she felt she was doing. She never really said what, but left the choice to us.

She made it seem that her work was not worthwhile, but it really was if you think of it, in some ways. My father was a taxi driver, but I don't remember much about him. All I remember about him was complaining about his work and that there was never enough money. He didn't enjoy it. He was a milkman, delivered bread and taxi driver was the longest job he stayed at. It was long hours definitely."

Myrna recalled that her Dad was never happy with his job. "I think he thought the world owed him a living. He was a brick-layer, when he worked. And the thing that is sad about that is that everybody wanted him for their jobs, because he was very good at it. But he was always so unhappy. Like everybody, he wanted enough money to live on, but he thought he worked too hard for it. He didn't work very much. He was always out of work. He had a sore back and he couldn't always work. He was a taxi driver for awhile because it was easier than laying bricks. It is a really hard job being a brick-layer. He would say, 'I built so-and-so's fireplace and do you know how many people they showed that fireplace to?' Downtown at the Paramount Theatre he would point out the nice brickwork he had done out in front. People phoned him all the

time because they liked his work. But he always was looking for an easy way. Why couldn't he have done one of these jobs and been happy?"

From her home experience, Melissa said; "I remember my Mom always came home from work so tired and it was always, don't bother Mom, she's tired. Now, I try not to go home and ever say I'm tired. For my Mom, I don't think she ever meant it that way, but tired meant too tired. As I got older and she started talking about work, it was better. But my Mom always carried it home with her, the worries about work and carrying everything on your shoulders. As a young child, we always had to be so good, because she was so tired. We felt like sometimes we couldn't breathe, because she was tired. I was young when my Father left and I don't know if he ever worked. He tells me he worked. He always talked about these great jobs - mounted police, truck driver, worked in the mines - but I never saw him work. I know he doesn't work now."

As children growing up in working class families, work was seen as a necessity to survive, but also that which seemed to sap all energy and creativity. Although there were some glimpses of the sense of pride and dignity that might come through accomplishing something through work (such as the brick-laying done by Myrna's father and the sets constructed by Donna's father that were rarely talked about), the overriding feeling was that one did not look to work to give

meaning, purpose or value in life.

Partners influence our outlook

When we looked at our own or our partners' experiences as working adults, there were very important changes in our expectations about work.

Melissa said; " Eddy (my partner) works very hard and he gets a lot of dignity from his work. As long as you work and you are bringing in the bread, that is reason to work. If I made \$100,000 and he only made \$10,000, it would be more important in his eyes for him to work because that is how he gets his dignity. He might not always enjoy his work, but it is a job. Lately he has been having a hard time at work. He works 6 days a week and he is never home. I feel like I'm a single parent to be honest with you. I wish he would let some of that dignity go. Like, you don't have to work 6 days a week for me to be happy with you. "

Faye asked; "But does he have a choice Melissa? It made me very angry when you told me about his trip to Toronto in the awful snowstorm, when he didn't have any choice about driving back, even though it was too dangerous."

Melissa replied; "No, he doesn't really have a choice. If he refused too many times, they wouldn't call him. During that last big snowstorm we had, he had to drive even though it was too dangerous. He drove the truck to Toronto into the storm all day and on the way back (we got the storm in

Montreal by then), he had to drive back into it. Both ways he got it. It was really bad. He had to come back and he couldn't see anywhere in front of him - like, nothing. A bigger rig passed him and swished him over on the curve. It came so close to him, it ripped off his mirror. He couldn't see anything and when he finally could see he was right on the edge of the ditch. He said he was never so scared in his life, but he had no choice about driving back.

"He got home at 5 in the morning, after working 16 hours that time and they called him to go back into work at 8 a.m. Another guy didn't go into work because he had been drinking. The guy that phoned said he didn't have a choice. But when he got to work Eddy said, 'I do have a choice!'. But he really doesn't. They apologized after to him, but he still had to work. He is finding it hard. He has to work or he won't get the jobs. Now he feels really used and with all his responsibilities now for the truck and the workers on the truck, he only gets another 35 cents an hour. It is really ridiculous! He only gets paid for the actual hours of work. If they don't unload right away and he has to wait around, he doesn't get paid for that. Sometimes he may be gone for 15 hours, but he only works and gets paid for 8 hours. He has a uniform, that we pay half for and it is very expensive. The pants are a blue-grey you can't buy in the regular stores and the \$40 cotton shirt has the company crest on it. Now I buy the crests and sew them on other shirts. For three months we

have been paying for uniforms, \$50 off his pay a week. This is the last week.

"Eddy is worried when I answer the phone, because I give the dispatcher an earful. He needs work boots. When he drove in the truck through the storm, there was no heating and his feet, in steel-toed boots, froze. He had to wrap his legs up. So now he bought boots without the steel toes. He chose warmth over safety. But he is very proud and I am proud of him."

Donna's family has gone through a major shift lately and now her husband works at home. "Actually it is okay for him now. He still goes out and he doesn't have the kids there during the day. I don't think he does as good a job in the home as I did, but I don't complain or say anything. He does it and I appreciate that. When he worked, he hated it. He could never find something he liked. Fred has respect for himself and feels he is worth a certain amount and he will not work below that. Sometimes I wish he would. When he was working before, he felt good because he was the breadwinner. That was important - it was his responsibility. Now that the roles have shifted and I'm working it took awhile for him to get used to it. I'm worried that he doesn't have a trade. He is getting older and it will be harder. He used to go out every day to fill out job applications, but now he doesn't as often. He has been turned down too many times."

Elizabeth said; "I think for my husband his work is more than a job. He likes what he is doing . At one time he was

out on the Roads Department tarring roads and he really hated it. He was transferred to his job now and its more than just work. When he first started with the City, when we were young, he was laid off a lot. Even when he was laid off he would be out looking for another job. He worked really hard. He never wanted me to work. He felt my place was in the home. But after awhile he realized with 4 children that the extra money wouldn't hurt. He is basically quiet. He talks a bit about his work, but there's not much to talk about. He talks about the people he works with, more than the actual work."

Our community's outlook on work

We agreed that in our community most people think of work as just a job and surviving. The majority of the people just want to work and be able to provide for their family. They don't expect the work to be enjoyable. With about half of our community unemployed, the "meaning" of work is not the issue. Although we feel we have come to hope for more in work than surviving and are quite critical about how destructive work can be to both the body and the soul, we see little in government policies at all levels that can bring hope for the workforce. We are deeply concerned about cut-backs in social programs, "cheap labour" programs and low minimum wage that are making the problem even worse.

Just getting a job is such a struggle here. People really want to work. But it is a fact that when you have a

family, on minimum wage you won't make as much as you get on welfare. You work all those hours and you don't even make what you could on welfare, which is 50% of the poverty line.

But being on welfare is so degrading. There are so few options and people are very discouraged. For most people in the community the kind of work they can find doesn't make you feel better about yourself. If it did, then you might want to do it, even if you made less. But when the work is just work, and wears you out, there is very little value in it.

Women are in a particularly precarious position and Melissa pointed out that "it is a big step, going into the workforce, especially for women who have a family. At least on welfare, you know you can rely on this cheque each month. But if you go into the workforce and you have to rely on that job, what happens if something goes wrong with the job? You feel like a failure to have to go back into the system again. If you haven't worked enough to get unemployment, you feel very discouraged and degraded to have to go back onto welfare."

Donna spoke of the difficult financial situation her family is in, explaining; "I'm the only one who brings money into the house and it is not enough. We qualify for a top-up from welfare, but we feel it is a step backward. When we got off the welfare, we didn't ever want to go back on."

"I don't understand that", Melissa argued. "You work hard Donna and you need that money to survive. Even if it is

only \$100 extra. You work hard for the money you do have and your commitment is very high. So to feel degraded - I understand what you are saying, but you need it to survive. You need a pat on your back more than anything. I'm very proud of her for the work she does. If you need extra money from welfare, it is there for you when you need it. If I needed welfare, I would apply. If I needed help for my family to survive I would get it. I would refuse to let myself feel belittled for being on social assistance even though I felt belittled when I went to the office to apply. I would do what I have to do for my family. I know somebody else who had a welfare top-up while she worked. She had 4 kids and it made quite a difference to have the medical card and the other benefits. She didn't make as much working as on welfare, but she felt good about her job so she didn't feel degraded. She was making as much as she could make at that job and then she got it topped up. She felt good because she was out working."

From her own experience Myrna understood Donna's fears about welfare and its effects on her. "I've been working 22 years now and have been off welfare. But I still have that fear of not having enough food. When you think about it, it is really ridiculous, but I always buy too much food. It is an awful feeling. For many, many years I worried about going back on welfare. What would happen if I got laid off or lost my job? It is such a scary feeling."

Elizabeth said; "I would feel really belittled if we had

to go on welfare. I don't know if I could, after watching my Mother work so hard all those years. She probably could have gone on welfare too, but she just never did it. I don't know why. I think she gave us those boundaries.

"It is scary to watch the teens or young adults, like my daughter Nancy. She was laid off just before Christmas and she didn't have enough for unemployment. She felt really bad and she has been looking for a job, but it is hard to get a job. She has an education, but that has nothing to do with it any more. She wouldn't think of going on welfare. She finds it is degrading. I worry a lot about young people who can't find jobs now. My son Peter works at McDonalds part-time - that's not a job. He doesn't like it, but he wants money and I can't give it to him. So he has to do it."

Will our children have work?

We all are concerned for our children and what lies ahead for them. Melissa commented; "If you really want a good job you need an education. That is not only for a job, but just to learn about the world around you. I stress that more than a job. I really missed out on learning so many things. There may not be jobs for our children to have, but I want all those options ahead of them. It is so important for the children to learn about other communities and other places where different cultures live."

Each of us has work that we feel is important and makes

us feel better about ourselves. We talked about how much we wanted our children to have that experience and how much we feared there would be no place for them. If young people in our community find jobs at all, they are usually minimum wage jobs, temporary or part-time jobs with no future and no sense that the work they do is really important. With so much unemployment they have to be willing to do anything, just as Eddy does after 15 years of work with the moving company, or they would be replaced.

We spoke of the kind of values that will be needed for people to make it in the years ahead and whether we needed to look at work with new eyes. We felt caught between knowing how destructive work so often is and yet, that without work, it is so hard to maintain your dignity and self-respect. We find it is a real challenge to be sympathetic about how tough it is to find a job and still encourage our young people to seek work with some sense of hope, while at the same time giving a clear message that they can be worthwhile if they are not working.

Elizabeth suggested; "You have to be very strong. Peter is outspoken and speaks his mind. I like that and he will probably go far. He's trying and he has an appointment with the R.C.M.P."

Donna added; "We have to tell our kids that they have to be the best that they can be, no matter what they are doing."

Faye asked; "Do we keep saying, that just to work is of

value, no matter what?"

Melissa replied; "The message should be that you may have to take a job you don't like and work towards another job. You have to be doing work so that you are doing something in your life. How many people in this community are doctors or lawyers? It must be very different from how families in Town of Mount Royal (an affluent community) speak to their children about work."

Elizabeth agreed and said; " I started in a real crummy job. We have to start in something we don't like and sometimes a break comes along. Not very often, but it does. But you have to start somewhere. You can't just stay home and do nothing. It is impossible. To a point it is alright to rely on your family, but you should not be a burden. You like to see your children get out and find a job and make something of themselves. I don't think any of mine have enough push right now. But there aren't any jobs and I guess they have to start lower down to get some experience. That's the way the system is. I've geared my daughter Nancy back into school to take a couple of courses. I don't want her to feel rotten about herself. I want her to feel good about herself. She has so many interests and so much she could offer. P.A.C.E. has helped her too, because she volunteers there a lot and that has been very important. She has to get out. I have seen the difference since she has stopped working. So we have to show our kids that there are other things they can do until

something comes along, I guess."

If workers counted

We began to explore the alternatives that we have seen and how we may look for different ways for people to gain independence and a sense of self-worth. We see this as a real challenge for us. The Point At Work (P.A.W.) upholstery project has been an attempt to find a way in which people in the community could create jobs, work co-operatively, learn together and give something of value to the community. Myrna's son is working as a volunteer in the After-School program and with the teens. Through this involvement and commitment there have been some real changes in him.

Donna described how her husband Fred is starting his own small business, growing small plants in their house and planning to sell them. "That may be our future, with people creating their own jobs. But it is so scary when you see people out on the highways with big placards - 'give me a job!' or selling papers in the middle of the road." We had all seen so much of these kind of jobs during our visit in Mexico, where even little children worked night and day selling anything just to have food.

We recalled that all those years Elizabeth's mother had to work didn't make life good for herself, but there is a pride in providing for your family. We realized that for us, our work is a very important part of our life and it is very

interesting, but for so many people that is not the case. Still, it is clear that Eddy really finds dignity through his work and that is what keeps him going. Elizabeth said; "That's what kept my Mother going. She was working, she was making her own money. She didn't get help from my Father to bring us up. She hated her job. She did it because she needed the money. She was bringing us all up and there were seven of us at that point. If she didn't do that she would have had to go on social assistance or something. I think we matured better because of it."

We are deeply concerned about the mounting unemployment in our community, in Québec and across Canada. The unemployment statistics claim that 10 to 12 % are unemployed in our province, but we know that these are not real unemployment figures. People who are the long term unemployed, those who have given up applying through government employment services and all those on welfare are not counted. A couple of years ago, before the last wave of job losses, a study done by the Department of Social Affairs of the Quebec Government, indicated that real unemployment was 28%. In addition, the large numbers who are working part-time because they can't find full time jobs are counted as employed in these statistics. Lack of work is a real crisis!

Instead of programs that will look for solutions to the destructive and costly results of unemployment, it seems that new policies just destabilize the job market further. Welfare

"work" programs force people to do work without paying even minimum wage and with no protection of worker's rights, while at the same time they provide free workers for businesses, school boards and organizations that would otherwise have paid for this work to be done. We feel that these so-called "training programs" offer little real training and even where they do, with no conditions to hire someone at the end of a 6-12 month welfare work program, it is more economical for a company to take on another free welfare recipient than pay for the job.

The visit from Mexico of women involved in worker's rights in that country helped us to make the connections with the broad effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement on workers. We are all trapped in a system that is set up to protect the profits of major corporations and big business at the expense of workers who are being forced to work for less (as compared to dollar value of 10 years ago), with no job security.

Last year Action Watchdog, the coalition of community groups in the Point, involved us all in a study of government budgets and our taxation system. We all know we have less and less money to live on, but it was shocking to see the enormous amount of "welfare" the big corporations get in tax breaks or unpaid taxes, as compared to the percentage tax the poorest of us pay through sales tax, hidden taxes, etc. At another Public Assembly we looked at the Debt, where it comes from,

why jobs are being cut and welfare programs are being used for cheap labour, and how the unemployed are being blamed for the problem. Instead of providing more help for the increasing numbers of people forced onto unemployment or welfare, we are facing serious cut-backs in social programs, health care and education. So this is leading to even more unemployment and the vicious circle continues.

If Women Counted

To give us other information that might help us understand the value of work in our society, we read sections of the book "If Women Counted"⁸. The Women's Discussion Group had gone to hear Marilyn Waring speak a few years ago at Concordia University and it had been a challenging evening. Even though the language of economics was new and quite difficult, it had whetted our appetites to know more.

Marilyn Waring is an economist and a member of Parliament from New Zealand, who has gone to many countries around the world to see how women are affected by work and the economy. She studied Gross National Product (the measure of everything a country produces by its work) in many countries as a measure of how work is valued. She observed that most of the work of women was never counted in this accounting. Her goal has been to get women's work counted, not necessarily for paying for

⁸ Waring, Marilyn, *If Women Counted - A New Feminist Economics*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1988.

housework, etc., but to be recognized and valued. In every country there are resources for work done, such as in schools, social services, hospitals, etc. Her conviction is that if countries started to count all women's work, they would be obligated to provide equivalent resources and support to do their work. This would really make a difference! We had a very lively discussion about the sections of her book that we read.

Faye explained why she had thought it would be interesting for us to read the chapter that is an introduction to the international economic system. "Not that we need to become economists, but we do have to know how money is spent and why. If we start at the beginning by looking at the word 'economy', it means 'how we manage our household'⁹ It means your time, your energy, your money, what you need to do to produce healthy children or healthy people who can be productive."

Donna was very excited by what she had read and jumped in to say; "When we read the definition for the word economy, I was surprised, because it's exactly what we do. We're actually like economists and not realizing that is exactly what we do at home. That word has changed so much today. They don't seem to stay with the original definition of what economy means, to be frugal and knowing how to spend your money wisely. We learn that ourselves as we're going along but it

⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

doesn't seem to apply any more to what economy is today. Today it seems to be strictly an exchange of work for money and it's not necessarily about being frugal. My daughter Jessica was taking an economy class last year in high school. In one of the lessons she had to do, they gave her an example of a company that was losing so much money and the manager had to figure out how to economize. They gave them different examples such as to get the workers to work longer for less and to use lay-offs."

After a long, heavy pause, she went on to say; "For me, I found it upsetting to see it in that way. They were leaving out the workers and how much the decisions meant to them. It made me feel that the workers were being used and abused. They were not looked at as people with feelings and flesh. They were looked at as things that did a job like machines. So you try to get the most out of it you can, putting in as little as possible. The end result was to get more production, you know, without having to pay more salary."

Faye commented; "That is what they call a profit led economy, that only deals with how you make money and doesn't deal with all the other effects. That is a drastic change from the original understanding of economy."

We were encouraged to find that the book's ideas reinforced how we felt about the system and it was good to know that other people shared our ideas about work. Donna was very enthusiastic about the comment on volunteer work. "She

(the author) talked about all the different kinds of work that are not recognized as productive, like informal work. Without people doing those kinds of jobs, other work would not get done. We rely on people doing those informal jobs.¹⁰ What really ticked me off was that the business of the drug addict, the dealer and the pimp is considered productive. Since his business is considered productive in economic terms, the government has to account for the money somehow. That really surprised me! It really ticks me off! He gets recognized for his part in production or whatever, yet all these people she is talking about, do not get recognized but do good work."

Faye commented; "I found the section on production and reproduction very interesting. She was speaking of reproduction as the work that reproduces people and other things of value. Reproduction for women may be giving birth, but it is not just that. It is also helping children to learn and grow. It is like reproducing the labour force and making people available to work. That is work that is not counted."

Elizabeth jumped in to say; "I like where she said 'the wealth of a nation is its children and the creators of that wealth have no economic visibility for their work.'¹¹ That's amazing." Everyone nodded in agreement and emphasized how important that concept was for us.

Myrna interjected; "But I think that the strong point in

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 28.

this is the value of women. If there were no women, there would be nothing. For me that just reinforced how important we are. I don't want to say it opened my eyes - because they were open - but it really reinforced the belief that we have in women, the work they do and what they can do. You can't just put them in a box and close the lid. They are out now and going to go on. It just reinforced what we know, but I also found that reading this made me want to do more. But in lots of places it was a put-down of women, such as the comment that 'the perception of labour as a curse comes from the very old habit of [work] belonging to women and to slaves'¹². What an awful comparison! I felt like taking that page and ripping it! It's terrible! It is like a slap in the face!"

Faye agreed; "It is an important concept to think of, that the whole country functions because women do unpaid work. That is a bit like slaves. It doesn't mean you don't have any freedom, but it means that a whole system of production in a country depends on all those people not being paid. If you ever had to pay them to produce workers, like we pay teachers for their work it would cost a fortune. You don't pay mothers to do their work, to do homework with the kids at night, to make sure they are fed well, but their work is needed just the same."

Donna continued; "We were just talking about the recognized labour market and how the informal work of

¹² Ibid., p. 26.

housewives is in the grey area. In brackets it says, 'the volunteer work is generally done by women while financial contributions to voluntary organizations - which take place in the market, are tax deductible and have special rules within the economic system - are generally made by men'¹³. The men profit by giving money to support it, but the volunteer work that is depended upon is itself, not recognized."

Myrna began to speculate; "I wonder if women's salaries are kept down not just to save money, but also to keep men's egos intact. It is not because women are not doing as good a job as the men. I wouldn't be surprised, now that I have read the statistics, that this is why the wages are never the same.

"Another thing that was interesting was the section on 'value'.¹⁴ We took a lot of time talking about hope, but 'Value' is almost as important as hope - maybe just as important. I can't separate it because the value of a person's work, the value of women's work, the value that goes with people caring and sharing, goes with the hope. We always talked about hope and the important word it was for our hopes and dreams. Value is too and I had never realized that. It, too, is a strong word. It is not just a little word.

"Value is a person's worth and I don't mean money. As a person, it is their esteem, their worth, their growth, their

¹³ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

whole being. We value somebody - for themselves, for their giving, what they give for people, what they do for each other and what they can give to others."

Donna commented; "Marilyn Waring talks about knowing the value of friendship, fresh air, - they mean something. They may not have a monetary value, but I was thinking of a nic-nac my kids gave me years ago. Like it may be just a little plastic thing, but it has a sentimental value. To someone else it is worthless, but to me it might be priceless."

We discussed how Marilyn Waring speaks of a shift in value, when the word is used as a money term. She explains that at first, market value was based on exchanging one person's work for another. But now we have shifted to money value that works very differently. We had a long discussion about "surplus value" and how it functions in our system now.

Elizabeth pointed out that she really liked the discussion about work, because we talked a lot about work also. "They say that work is 'an activity requiring a worker to give up his [her?] tranquillity, his [her?] freedom and his [her?] happiness.'¹⁵ That really got to me. You do give up some tranquillity and possibly a bit of freedom, but it depends what kind of work you do. It is a very masculine view. But maybe my mother was giving up her freedom and happiness at times for her work. But housewives are not getting paid. It is not considered work, but they are giving

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

up tranquillity and some freedom."

"We've always been saying when we talk about work, that we don't consider our jobs work any more", Donna replied. "It's part of our life. Whereas for many people who can't find any enjoyment in their jobs, they are giving up their freedom. Further along in the book it says that mothers who are staying home taking care of children are not working because 'no money changes hands'. The discussion about the market value and the moral value is very important. There is the market value which all of our economy is based on, but the moral value, all those other things we have talked about that we consider of value, are not tangible and don't have a price on them. This Adam Smith (the economist Marilyn Waring writes about, who has had such an impact on the structure of our economy), he is quite a(a big laugh and facial expression that says it all). I would like to know where he is getting his information from. He says 'man [and I assume he means the male species] will not do anything out of kindness'. Only if he is getting paid will he do anything. He goes on to say he is speaking of the male gender, but doesn't acknowledge either women's or men's generosity or good deeds."

This really stirred up Elizabeth who referred to the comment that "If Adam Smith was fed daily by Mrs. Smith, he omitted to notice or to mention it."¹⁶ "I like that! Of course she wasn't paid for it. It was her job to do that. It

¹⁶ Ibid., p.23.

is still a lot like that nowadays and there are a lot of men that think that way. That has to be changed."

Myrna was very enthusiastic about what she had been reading and was ready for some action. "I'd like to sit here after reading this today and think if everyone rebelled, if all the women rebelled, what would happen to the world? But I am also asking the question, 'How free am I?' I know I don't have 100% freedom, but is it because I block myself and don't want to go that extra step? Or am I not able to? Is society stopping it or am I doing it myself? I am going to look at that because I just felt that I have not gone far enough. This is a strange comparison, but I will make it anyway. We talk about how we do worship and now that things have changed, we can never go back. I think the same thing happened with this when I was reading this book. If I am not doing things that I want to do, why am I not doing them? Is it because I don't want to go ahead, or are there blocks stopping me? Is the system stopping me?"

We are realizing that we can't do any of this work for social change without knowing how much of it is personal change we are looking at and how much of it means we have to change our whole system or other people's values. It is very interconnected. We saw more clearly how our own ideas of work have been formed out of our experience and how strong the forces are that want to "use" people rather than value their gifts and contributions.

Our reading and discussions reinforced our belief in the value of community work - paid or unpaid - as a way to both improve the quality of life for us all and to provide opportunities for people to find meaning through working together.

CHAPTER 6

"HOPE from GLOBAL NEIGHBOURS"

Our trip to Mexico two years ago has had a very important impact on our work. We participated in a two week program called Global Awareness Through Experience (G.A.T.E.) which involved meeting with popular groups doing development work in Mexico City and out in the countryside. Five women from the Point (including the four women of this writing collective) joined five final year ministry students taking part in United Theological College's yearly global education experience and Faye had been invited to co-ordinate the group. What an exchange! We were challenged and profoundly moved by the courage and creativity of the Mexican people who seemed to be able to create miracles out of nothing. Although the poverty was so much greater, we could really feel directly what they were living, out of our own experience in the Point.

The experience has deeply affected us in our work and we will share some excerpts from reflections on the experience that were written shortly after we returned.

Elizabeth's reflections

"When I was first asked if I would be interested in going to Mexico I was filled with excitement and disbelief, but also with anticipation.

I had mixed feelings because I wanted to go but I had my family to think about. Could they do without me for two weeks? I also had my job to consider, but there was another problem. I was terrified at the thought of travelling by plane. I had vowed a long time ago that I would never set foot on a plane. I have this terrible fear of heights and going on a plane was out of the question. I must have changed my mind a dozen times over the Christmas holidays. My family told me to go and not to worry about them. Faye told me I didn't have anything to worry about. I knew I would regret it if I didn't go because an opportunity like this one doesn't come knocking too often. With everyone's encouragement I did go and I am very pleased that I did.

The plane ride was overwhelming at first but then I began to settle down. Actually, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. It was fear of the unknown that almost kept me from spending two most memorable weeks. Sometimes I look overhead at passing planes and I can hardly believe that I was actually up that high. It may not seem important to most people but my first plane ride has helped me to realize that I can do most anything. I have overcome my fear of travelling by plane and that is something I never thought possible.

When we arrived at the airport in Mexico, I kept wondering if I had made a mistake in coming. There were so many people and they weren't speaking my language. I no longer had the safety of my own country. Now I knew what it

was like to be the foreigner. I have grown from this experience though. I find that I am more sensitive to people's needs. I now try to make a genuine effort to help them if I can.

I felt more at ease when we arrived at the Centro Lutherano. The garden was beautiful and Marie, who welcomed us, spoke English. She made us feel at home. The fence around the buildings made me feel more at ease too. I had this misconception that we wouldn't be safe in Mexico. I had always heard that Mexico was a place that was full of beggars and thieves. I had been misled! There were beggars and thieves but there are some in Montreal too. Seeing for myself has helped me to realize that I must form my own opinions and not rely on hearsay.

What I disliked the most was seeing the families begging in the streets. The hunger and the hurt could be seen clearly in the children's eyes. This was difficult to take. It was heartbreaking to realize that the children must grow up very quickly. Our children can grow through the normal stages of childhood whereas many Mexican children were forced to take on adult responsibilities.

Something that touched me deeply was the two young boys who boarded the bus singing and playing their guitars. They were about six or seven years old. They were alone without parental guidance. It saddened me to see such young children doing this sort of thing, but it was an everyday occurrence in

Mexico.

The talk by Michael Picard about Mexican Economy and the International Debt was very informative. I learned about the Free Trade Agreement and its effects on the people of Mexico as well as the people of Canada. I really gained a better understanding of the whole situation. When we visited the Canadian Embassy I realized that the Canadian Ambassador was trying to make us believe that the Free Trade Agreement was good for all the parties involved. He was full of baloney.

Our trip to Ixmiquilpan was a very educational and informative one. We visited the co-operatives and saw for ourselves the work that was involved in setting up and keeping them going. The common stable was really impressive. There were seven families who took turns caring for the cows. When the cows have calves, these calves are given to other communities so they can start a common stable. The enthusiasm and the teamwork of these families are what makes the co-operatives successful. They work together to make better lives for themselves and for others.

The SEDAC Centre hit home for me. It was a lot like the people at St. Columba House. They stand behind the people of their community and help them to fight for their rights. They don't give up this fight until they get what they want or until they have at least made a difference.

This is what I noticed at the Women's Centre that we visited in downtown Mexico City. The women there set goals

for themselves and no matter what obstacles stood in their way, they overcame them. They look at these obstacles as challenges and this is why they are succeeding in whatever endeavours they undertake. Women are taking a stand in Mexico and they are getting the job done. Whether the project they undertake has to do with nutrition, health, education, culture, housing or child care, the women are making a difference and this really impressed me.

St. Columba House is a mansion compared to their house, but we all know that looks can be deceiving. These women have drawn up a ten year plan which will become a reality because it is the women who initiated it and it is the women who will stop at nothing until their goals are realized. This Women's Centre impressed me considerably because it hit home base for me. When we were just starting up P.A.C.E. we had a lot of obstacles to overcome. I don't know how many times I wanted to give up because I thought it was a lost cause to try to beat the system. With each others' drive and encouragement, we did beat the system. We now have a thriving adult education centre in Point St. Charles and yes, it was a small group of women who started it and continue to oversee the day to day operation of it.

I have renewed enthusiasm for our centre now that I have seen the women of Mexico succeeding in ways that was unthinkable only a few short years ago. These women didn't let anything stand in their way and it is this persistence and

enthusiasm that I bring back with me. Even the women of the Christian Base Communities are standing up for their rights. Women really are making a difference.

Something else that really affected me was the Jesus dolls. These dolls were treated and cared for with respect. When I tell anyone about these dolls and what they stand for, they don't understand. You had to be there to get the full effect of the faith. The effect was so strong that I bought one of the dolls and I tell everyone the story behind it. The faith must be contagious because I also handle the doll with respect. I feel I must treat this doll as if it were a real baby because it stands for something sacred and beautiful as all children are.

Most of all I cherish the memory of the reflections we had as a group. I felt very much at ease during these times. We were able to say what we thought and no one laughed. The students were open-minded and very easy to get along with. They made us feel like part of their group. As Melissa said, we were very nervous that we wouldn't fit into their group but we did.

I learned so much in such a short period of time. The faith and the enthusiasm has already affected me in my everyday life. It has helped me attempt to solve a major problem in my family and because I have grown in awareness and sensitivity from the G.A.T.E. experience, I know the solution is near. The memory of the trip to Mexico will stay with me

forever."

Myrna's reflections

"In Mexico people seem to respect each other in the work they do, since they are working for their survival. Even the people who sold the gum on the Metro were seen as working people. You didn't get the feeling that they were lazy and didn't want to work. At home there is no work for a lot of people. They are looked down on as people that don't want to work, are lazy and want to live off government support. People in Mexico seem to have a respect for one another.

Everyone is so religious. I noted this the first time I went also (Myrna had accompanied the theological students on their global awareness study trip two years previously), but this time it really made me stop and take notice. As we were going through the market many people were carrying dolls. They were not everyday dolls, but special ones that were meant to be the baby Jesus. At first I just looked and then I couldn't take my mind off what I was seeing. Every time I saw someone pass by, I would watch the people's faces and how they held the doll. I really wanted to know what they were feeling. I just couldn't think about anything else.

These dolls represent Jesus 'coming of age' when he went to the temple at 12 years old. We did a lot of talking with the women of the Point about how we all felt about it and there were different opinions. After talking, we agreed

that people worship each in their own way. We talked about how much faith all these people had. I believe that their faith is so strong that the Jesus doll is looked upon as one of their children. Their hopes and dreams are part of their everyday lives.

We were in Ixmiquilpan on Feb. 2, the celebration of Jesus 'coming of age' and saw the crowds of people bringing their dolls to be blessed at the church. I will never forget this. It shows how our faith carries us through our daily lives. I believe that when times are hard in Mexico, at home, in our community, we all need hope. The Jesus doll helps people to go on and strengthen their faith, their love and the hope for a better world and life. I don't believe that it takes the place of Jesus, but is just a helping hand. Four of us brought Jesus dolls home with us.

We had a speaker talk to us on Mexican economy and how Mexico got in so far over its head. We really thought about our own country and what is happening here. With all the lay-offs and the shortage of work, some of us are worried that the same thing might happen here.

When we went to the countryside to Ixmiquilpan, we saw how communities worked together to get housing, decent drinking water and started co-ops for a decent place to work. They started with very few people. Some people got together from each village and decided what they needed the most. Then people put in time and labour on the week-ends or whenever

they could. No one is paid for the labour and the money is put out for materials only. Communities help one another and exchange information whenever they can. The most important thing is that they gave of themselves, all they had. Sometimes in our Women's Group or other work at home, we don't want to hurt people's feelings or push too hard, so we back down. Now it is time to follow through in what we believe, even if we ruffle a few feathers.

The Base Christian community we met with is a very exciting group of people. They apply their faith in their everyday lives and nobody is taking that from them. They know what they need to survive and they go and get it, with a lot of hard work. They don't wait for large numbers. The community needed safe gas tanks for their cooking and the gas company was not treating them right. So three women decided to do something about it, took on the gas company and won. Here at home we feel we need large numbers to take action or support a cause. Maybe if we wait too long, things will pass us by.

Our visit in the barrios showed us how little space we need as people to live in. These people had so very little. They were happy to see us and welcomed us with smiles. They were willing to share their lives, homes and their stories. I found this part very hard, even today, as I remember when I used to be asked to tell my story of how I brought up my children on welfare. I often wonder how they felt inside and

what did they think of us. Since for them, I am a person on the outside, I hope they know that I am really sincere and care.

In every home and almost on every corner there is a picture or shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe. It is said that she appeared to a poor peasant man, she was dark in colour and spoke the native language. She was one of them. Many people take this as a sign of Mary being with the poor and that she is there to help them through all of their hard times.

We all went to see the Ballet Folklorico and I have a hard time to say how I felt about this. When Chucho Alvarado talked to us about the Mexican identity, he spoke of internal racism and that people with lighter skin were treated better than those with a darker skin. They get the better jobs and are seen as the right kind of people. At the ballet, we noticed that all the dancers were light skinned. On the buses and metros all the children that were dressed well or on their way from school were also light skinned. Mexican people treat their own people like we do our aboriginal people. It is time we all work together to make a change.

The meetings with the U.T.C. students and the women of the Point were a very important part of our program. Faye helped us talk about what we saw, how we felt at the time and how we would feel when we got back home. For myself this was one of the best parts of the program.

I feel like a stronger person today. I hope it lasts and

that I can make my community a better place for all. There is a lot of work to be done for myself also. With each of us doing our best we can make a change and we can't do it alone."

Donna's reflections

"Even with the briefings before the Mexico trip, I didn't expect to be overwhelmed with the feelings that I felt. Our first outing took us to the market and into the mainstream of Mexican life. Walking past the people who were all Mexican, of course, I felt like a minority. Our little group of white North Americans looked out of place. Then going past the men, I didn't realize how much T.V. had influenced me. They are depicted as the 'bad guys', with their hard, stone faces. It took me a few days, but I worked this out.

I was outraged by the cruelty of the conquest of the Spaniards. My son, who is in Grade 5, is studying about Jacques Cartier. He was telling me about his feelings of Cartier coming to America. He was not impressed and said that he thought Cartier was cruel. Upon hearing this, my husband said that Cartier was not that bad in comparison to the treatment of the native people of Mexico.

As Chucho spoke of the Mexican identity, I occasionally shook my head in disbelief of how Mexicans were abused and how they have learned to be prejudiced towards one another. The more European influence in the genes, the more elite one is.

I loved interacting with the people. It was fun in the

market and beautiful, also. Bartering with them was interesting. Sometimes I felt that I was taking advantage of them, understanding the hard work they put into their crafts. But then, did they take advantage of me, because I was a "tourist"? That's okay if they did.

It is really something, how adaptive they are. They have no choice. They had to be in the past, taking Christianity and merging it with their own faith, as a means of survival. Now they have to use whatever talents they have, to live.

The women have a long way to go in re-educating their children and men about the violence done to them. How wrong it is for them to be looked down upon. They want to have a place in the church. They are trying to take control of their lives, to have children when they want and trying to break the patriarchal system. More power to them!

In Barrio Norte, my first impression was that these houses should be condemned. Then I felt guilty as I listened to how the people came, squatted there and made this place their own. The children were wonderful and followed us around. They loved the polaroid pictures taken of them. They have a curiosity about them and have no fear. They were interested about who we were and where we came from. One boy was so thankful for the polaroid pictures we had given them, that he presented us with a gift - a broken chain taken from his pocket. It was the only thing he had, but it was everything!

Coming back from Ixmiquilpan, two young boys boarded our bus to make money. They were no more than 8 and 10 years old. I kept thinking, where was their mother? Are they alone? I have two boys that age. I kept on seeing their faces when I looked at these two boys. Even now, my heart breaks for them.

Those stairs! How could anyone who is sick climb those stairs at the Women's Clinic in Mixcoac? Their embroidery is nothing like mine because they are learning stitches to do suturing themselves. They are really courageous. Having to take their health in their own hands is ironic because just down the hill there is a clinic that was built by the government for the community. The irony is that it lies vacant - no staff, no supplies. Just an empty building. It is there for the government to say, "Don't say I never gave you anything".

Liberation Theology - the more I heard about it, the more I realized it is something like back home. When I first started going to the Worship Group at St. Columba House, God was distant, someone all-powerful and infinite. Me - a sinner, lucky if God took pity on me and never feeling like I'm good enough to go to heaven. With each meeting God became more reachable. The distance began to disappear. God is with me in my struggles.

The Base Christian communities see this also. They know that God is with them in their struggles and feels their pain and their joy. They must stand firm in their fight for their

communities and for their basic needs.

Mujeres y Mujeres (Women's organization we visited in Mexico City) is another example of people taking their lives into their own hands. They have taken the initiative to better their lives. They come together from other parts of the country, in solidarity, to obtain the same goals. When hearing their ten year plan and looking at the building they are in, one cannot help but wonder how they are going to fulfil their dream. But from visiting the groups and communities, one understands that they will. They have the strength and the power.

Mexico has shown me the strength of the human spirit. How faith can truly move mountains. There is power not only in numbers but in only a few. Where there is a will, there is a way. Despite all the wrong done to Mexico and her people, I can't help but feel optimistic. They will not be broken. They will find the resources to use. And if they can do it, then we can do it too."

Faye's reflections

"Over the years, we have had visits from people from many countries of the world, who have found it valuable to make connections with community organizations in the Point - the Third World within the First World. Our groups found the visits very interesting and often kidded that soon it would be their turn to tour another country. When I gathered together

the group of women who had been engaged in community organizing for years to tell them of the invitation to join the students from United Theological College in a global awareness experience in Mexico, they were stunned. Their reaction moved from disbelief, to excitement, to deep concerns about how they could ever organize their families or jobs to get free to go, fears of travel and the unknown, and practical questions about funding. It was a remarkable feat in itself to see how these problems were solved collectively. Funding was received from the United Church, the United Theological College, St. Columba House, individuals who saw the potential of such an experience and people like the cook at St. Columba House who sold baking, made on her week-ends, to contribute to our expenses.

The impact and the significance of direct contacts with people working in communities in Mexico is very evident in the previous accounts. An added dimension of this experience was the interaction between the women of the Point and the theological students. Of course, each individual in the total group added their special insights to the experience, but there were special dynamics that came out of the life experience of the two groups. The women from the Point could identify so directly with the Mexican people we met, feeling a really strong bond and connection that transcended all language barriers. The students offered skills of analysing and articulating what we were experiencing from a theological

perspective. This provided a real challenge to the whole group to continually clarify and make connections between what we were seeing, our faith and our work back home.

The dialogue between us and the theological students was a real challenge. I think that we were able to help them "feel" the reality and they helped us to find ways to articulate what we were experiencing. There were some tough discussions and perhaps the most difficult, unresolved conflict revolved around the significance of the Jesus dolls. For the women in the group (the woman theological student included), there was an empathy with the deep significance of what they saw. Some of the students had theological reservations about the meaning of the Jesus dolls and pushed for more clarity and explanations. Two very different ways of relating clashed head-on.

Our meeting with the FAT (Fundaciones Autonomnes de Trabajadores) was like completing a circle, since representatives from this organization had visited the women's projects in St. Columba House nine months earlier. When we walked in there was a great welcome and they showed us pictures they had taken of our work. This was the last community group we met with and they helped us pull together what we had seen of worker co-operatives, women's struggles, health concerns, workers' rights and the effect of global economic forces on all our work. We saw how they too were affected by the Free Trade Agreement, by the policies of big

international corporations and governments that were directed by economic growth policies rather than the good of the people. This was certainly confirmed by our fruitless meeting with the Canadian Ambassador to Mexico who would not deal with the effects of such policies on the lives of workers and families.

As we talked with groups in Mexico, we were constantly relating it to work we were trying to do back home, learning from them and sometimes seeing the next step that we could take. As we shared our experiences too, it helped us to see our work in a broader perspective. We were profoundly changed by the faith and the hope that we found in the work of the people. We were strengthened by the connections with other people who were struggling to bring life with so few resources. This experience continues to live with us as a touchstone in difficult times."

The impact of Mexico back home

So, we came back home with our eyes opened in new ways to the struggles of our own community. On our return we shared our experiences with over 100 women in the community at our luncheon for International Women's Day. It is hard to convey the significance of this visit to others, but we know how much it is affecting our work here. We have seen how this encounter has made us so much more aware of shared struggles in other countries and we really tune into reports of world events on

the T.V. or papers, with new interest. We discussed how the experience has profoundly affected our attitudes and work in our own community over the past two years.

Elizabeth surprised us when she said; "I never thought of this as being a poverty-stricken community before. I didn't know very much about what was happening here before. I came back and I see now that there are more people that are poor here than I thought, and they really need help. I was kind of on the outside looking in until I went to Mexico and saw everything there. When I came back my eyes were opened. I started looking at more and seeing more. Even here at St. Columba, I had seen the line-ups of people before, but it never really struck me as to why they were here (for food). Then I started realizing that there are a lot of people who can't make ends meet."

Melissa had a similar reaction and explained; "It is hard to see poverty all around. When I first got to Mexico I thought that the Point was like heaven in comparison. But it isn't. There are different types of poverty, but there are the same problems and there are a lot of similarities. There are the people that live on the streets, people who do without food, without nutrition or medical care and the violence against women. There is such a poor level of education and such high numbers of drop-outs in our community and that is linked to poverty.

"It is when I came back that I felt poor, coming from

this area. I wondered, 'Have I been poor and I never even really realized that?' I never felt poor in the sense of never having any money - but then I realized that we really don't do well. We have to struggle for every cent we make and then it is gone. Now I am not working and I feel poorer than I ever have in my life. But I had never looked at myself that way before. I think that people in the Point don't look at themselves as being poor. Even though it is around you all the time - all the time - you are so used to it that it is an everyday thing. I don't mean that we don't see it, but we have adjusted to it here. But when you go somewhere else, like Mexico, and then look upon your own community, it opens your eyes more and more.

It has been very good for me because that is what has kept me involved in trying to make changes - for myself and for other people. My work has changed since I came back from Mexico. I worked in the co-operative downstairs before, but it was just a job. I never felt the sense of what it is like to be part of a co-operative, until I came back."

Elizabeth responded very emphatically that she really understood that. "It is like P.A.C.E. I was just running an adult education centre, but I wasn't really a part of it. Now I feel more a part of it. [Everyone was amazed when she said this! Elizabeth has given years of hard work and extraordinary determination in setting up this adult education centre.] It is a commitment now. It is not a job. It is a

commitment to the community. I have to be there and I have to help whoever I can. Mexico has had a lot to do with that. It has opened my eyes a lot, especially in education. I hadn't realized until I came back that there were that many people who dropped out of school here. I started to hear more and I am more sensitive to people's needs now. I was always a part of P.A.C.E, but now I feel that P.A.C.E. is more a part of me."

We felt that part of the shift in our understanding had come as we talked with groups in Mexico, sharing with them what some of our work and projects were about. In speaking to others about our hopes and goals, we saw our own work more clearly.

Melissa spoke of the difficulties women experienced in Mexico and that this had the biggest impact on her when she returned home. She remarked; "I never thought of the women in the Point being controlled by men in any way, until I was in Mexico. When I got back, my eyes were opened. I never realized that women had to ask their spouses for permission to do things, for money, how it was going to be spent and the abuse they dealt with". When we reminded Melissa of the many discussions she had participated in with the Women's Discussion Group on these problems and how she had struggled with abusive control in her previous marriage, she replied; "But that was for me! I just didn't see that this was a problem for all the women, or at least many of them, to keep

their independence or have their own minds. Physical abuse too - your eyes are closed to it. But when I saw it in another poverty-stricken community, it hit home and it hurt. Women's issues were the most important impact of the trip for me."

Faye commented that she was so impressed with how much the people in Mexico could do with so little. "The Women's Centre in downtown Mexico and the projects we saw in Ixmiquilpan really pushed me to see that we have to do more ourselves in our community here. I don't mean that we give up protesting government cut-backs and unjust systems, but I think we now have taken a different direction here as we have seen that a lot of our work must be building a community. It doesn't mean that we don't fight for rights, just wages, etc., but it no longer has the priority that the community building has for me. Ixmiquilpan in particular was powerful, as we saw people who had milk from the cows exchange it for the cheese made in another community. When calves are born, they are passed on to another village to start their heifer project. Those who grew corn brought it to the community who had a small grinding mill, and the exchange went round and round. They have set up a sewing industry, seeking contracts from major companies, but maintaining control over their own work conditions. It has had a profound effect on me and been a real challenge to find collective ways for people to survive here."

Myrna spoke of the ongoing impact the Mexico experience has had on her and recalled; "The thing that really helped me

open my eyes was the night Faye asked me to do the presentation of our community in the church in Mexico. When I came back home, it was as though I really had found my place at last. I didn't have to look any more. Do you remember how I used to say that I was never satisfied and I was always looking for something. Not that there isn't room for improvement and that I don't have to go on, but I am satisfied now. I really feel now that I know who I am and what I want to do."

Faye replied; "It is your call and it feels right now. When we needed someone to stand up in the church in Mexico to bring greetings, I looked around and everyone was turning white or looking at the ground. But when I asked you, you said yes right away. That was the first time I had seen you respond so readily and you went on to bring a powerful message of solidarity from our community. You have a special ability to communicate in ordinary words what the mission we are engaged in is about and your deep faith comes sailing through. Since you have come back, that readiness and assurance has grown in wonderful ways."

Myrna went on to say that "The second thing that was really important to me was that I found when I came home that I wasn't as shy to express myself and talk about my faith. That goes back to the Jesus doll. It made me see that people weren't shy or hesitant to show where their faith was and they used the Jesus doll to express how they felt. I still joke

around, but I can talk more easily now about how I feel about God and about my work."

The opportunity to visit Mexico with a group of theological students had also had a special impact. Listening to the students talk and responding to their questions about our community had really helped us. We all agreed that we each had educated each other in different ways. The students had often asked interesting questions we would not have thought to ask and so we learned from the responses of the people. Melissa found that combining learning with worship and theological discussion was a new experience for her. We all had been challenged to articulate what we thought and this had helped us to be clear about our own beliefs. We had found it easier than the students to identify very readily with the Mexican people we met, because of a common understanding between communities of struggle.

Faye commented; "What I saw happening was that the questions or the reactions of the students often pushed you to express yourselves. When there was disagreement, it was a real challenge to find the way to explain exactly why you didn't agree. You were so moved by the significance of the Jesus dolls for the people, but we all had some difficulty putting into words how we felt. The strong resistance of the students to feeling the profound spiritual importance of the Jesus dolls made you push and push to find ways to express what you felt. It was frustrating and at times explosive, but

you also were raising questions for them that they would not have seen."

We spoke of what it had been like to be a minority in another country and that we had learned from this experience. It wasn't just the question of language, but realizing that we could not readily understand another culture and the ways of the people. We realized that if minorities in our community feel as much like outsiders as we did, then there is a lot that must be done to deal with this problem.

We had an unexpected surprise from the United Theological College who honoured our group with the "Prize in Contextual Theology" at their Convocation. We were proud to receive this recognition which usually goes to a student in Theology. We had been so touched by the determination and work of the Women's Centre in Mexico City that we decided to share our gift with them.

We have been changed by our encounter with people of another country and culture. We also have found hope in their work and renewed hope in the significance of our own work.

CHAPTER 7

HOPE brings CHANGE

"We have been talking about how we started getting involved and changing. So it is important if we want to know how we get other people involved or help others to get excited about different ways to make their lives interesting, to try to understand what makes us change. Work makes us change; people make us change; experiences make us change. Fifteen years on welfare can defeat some people, but other people, like you Myrna, have moved on from there. It is really important to see what we can learn from all of this." ¹⁷

To have some sense of what changes we have experienced or observed and the vision that keeps us moving on, we decided to focus on our goals for change in the community. We named these goals as Work, Value/Self-worth, Empowerment of Women, Education, and Community Building. We will look at these areas to see what progress has been made, how we or others have been changed in the process, what has held us back from going further and what changes will need to happen to move ahead. In all of this we are very aware of the sense of hope that undergirds this movement and we are trying to name that hope.

Change happens both in the community and in our personal lives. Although we will discuss these aspects separately, it is so obvious that they are interwoven and go back and forth.

¹⁷ Faye Wakeling

Work

Work is on the minds of everyone in our group and in the community. Both at Saint Columba House and in the community coalitions that we work with, work is always the number one concern. The community's goal is to provide employment that is stable with fair wages that one can live on. This goal seems more and more unattainable in the face of increasing lay-offs, plant closures and part-time or contract jobs.

The other side of the significance of work is the self-worth, independence and growth that can come from work that is fulfilling. Throughout our discussions about the meaning of work, we have focused on how much we have been changed by work of a certain kind. The 35 years of night-time cleaning that Elizabeth's mother did was so very hard on her and her family. She was exhausted and destroyed by the work itself, even if it was the means for her to independently care for the needs of her family. Eddy takes great pride in his work and providing for his family, but at the same time he is very aware that he is often abused and exploited by his company. Work that destroys and wears us out may be a necessity for survival, but it is not our goal.

The Point At Work. upholstery co-operative has been a six year commitment to create employment in conditions that respect the workers, give them responsibility for what they produce and produce something of value for the community. It is fragile right now and has been a very sobering example of

how difficult it is to attain all these goals. In spite of this, we have seen very significant change in the participants in the project, and for many, the way they work and the goals they are holding onto, are very important.

But how do we find hope in such a struggle? That is the tough question and a discussion we had about this, shows that there is a lot of sliding back on the way uphill. We asked if there were times we had not been able to bring hope or help people along. Faye responded that she remembered feeling a sense of hopelessness meeting with the women from P.A.W. a few months ago. "I felt an incredible frustration with the group. I hope you don't misunderstand this, because I think what you women do is extraordinary. It has been a long, hard struggle and I really respect that. But I felt so frustrated with our meetings for about two months. It was like you were losing a sense of where you were going. I didn't know how to keep that hope up, or whether it had been unrealistic in the first place. I felt so sad."

Melissa replied; "Well that's how I felt when I talked about hope. I'm there every day and that is how I feel all the time. That's why I said, it's a struggle. There is the hope that it will get better, but sometimes I find that hard to see."

Faye added; "We are up against many things that we can't change. But for the things we can, it is often hard to know how we can help each other, push at the same time as being

understanding and encourage each other to do what we want to do together."

Myrna responded; "I was so nervous about coming back to start the year without a co-worker in Hand in Hand (due to cut-backs, the assistant in this daily program for intellectually challenged adults that Myrna co-ordinates, had to be let go). I had to push myself more than I ever thought I could. I guess what I am saying is that we really have to push ourselves - everybody. When you are down, you also have to have people to reassure you that you are okay and that you can do it. In your program of P.A.W. you have to have that. Faye reassured me many times when I didn't know what I was going to do. But I didn't want that work to close. If Hand in Hand closed it would never open again. If P.A.W. closes, it will never open. You have to make sure that it will work. I'm not saying that it is easy - it is very hard."

Elizabeth agreed and said; "It's like P.A.C.E. You can't sit back for a minute. Registration was really low this year and I'm frustrated. I need some reassurance. We don't have as many classes as we should have. So I got on the phone to former students and I managed to get a few more. I felt so frustrated, but then you get reassured. I have people phone, like the woman that said, 'I'm 69, do you think I can take a course? I'm afraid you can't teach old dogs new tricks.' But I gave her examples of others who had succeeded and she is coming to French now. My Mom came to French when she was 70

and she loved it. It is things like that which really give me hope. You have someone coming in to read a book to you, who couldn't read before and it's so good. I tracked down two people who weren't coming because they couldn't afford it and told them we wanted them there. So they are coming to the Reading & Writing now. Some people couldn't come because they didn't have a babysitter. So I said just bring the kids. I'll watch them, I'll find a way! There's a lot of hope there. There really is. We have to work on it."

In looking at the changes that have been happening in P.A.W. recently, we realized that the writing of this book had helped this to happen. Even though we have meetings every two weeks to discuss the work, it was describing our co-op for others that provided the opportunity to step back to look at why we became involved, our initial hopes and dreams for the project, how we have succeeded and where we have failed. This has really helped us to put it all in perspective. As Melissa said, "The discussion we had for the book was good because of what came out of it afterwards. I felt that a lot had been thought out and I felt relieved. Everybody's outlook and honesty has been a lot better since this meeting of P.A.W. " Now that the decision has been made to make the business stable and look at the community service goal further down the road, there has been a change in how people feel. Sharing the problem with others, such as the Staff and Board of Saint Columba House, has brought both understanding and support.

The write-up of P.A.W. in the Annual Report was another step and a difficult task for Donna to do. She went over all the minutes of the past years, reflecting on what had been tried, what had worked and what had not worked. She wrote, in part

*"Five years ago, P.A.W. set out with three goals in mind: 1. to provide stable employment
2. to teach a trade
3. to provide a service to the community
The women have worked hard in learning a trade that takes years to perfect. There is a quality of craftsmanship and pride that goes into each piece.
The past year has produced growing pains for P.A.W. as providing a service for the community has been difficult. To do such and maintain financial stability, right now, feels unobtainable. The decision to put this goal on hold was difficult for the women to make. It feels like taking a step backward. There is confidence that in the future this will be reinstated."*¹⁸

Donna explained; "I wanted to show it like it really is, but I also wanted to end on a positive note."

Faye replied; "And you did. What I found was very, very good about it was that you started off with the original goals. Then you said that we can't meet our goal and I think it is the first time that you have said to others - 'We can't do that.' You are always feeling guilty about it when people come in to see the project and you speak of your goals. When I saw this write-up I thought it was really good. You said clearly, we can't do it right now, but you also said that you weren't giving it up."

Myrna suggested to Faye that it seemed that P.A.W. needed a pusher to come in to check every couple of days to see that

¹⁸ Saint Columba House 1994 Annual Report, p. 10 (b).

they get going. Faye replied; "I don't see that as my role. I think my role is to encourage those in the co-operative to do this for themselves."

Melissa explained; "But we have come a long way in our meetings. Before it was just Faye that ran the meetings, but it was not what she wanted. She wanted us to run them, but it took us a long time to do it ourselves. It is just recently that we were able to say 'Faye, this is what you decided, not what we decided, but we agreed with you because we weren't confident enough to disagree.' I admire us for hanging in. None of us could afford to work without salaries, but we have. I am actually more hopeful now in one way. I think that reality has sunk in and people know that either we're going to make it or not. So we will have to work that much harder."

Myrna's face lit up when she heard this determination and she said, very quietly and firmly; "The struggle is the hope. You know, it works together. You are struggling damn hard to make sure it succeeds. There is hope there. You can't say there is no hope!"

We looked at other ways we have tried to get jobs for people in the Point. We had been involved through the community coalition in approving zoning changes to allow a Club Price outlet to be built in the community. Much debate had gone on about the pros and cons of this move, but because the company promised 90% of the jobs for people in the region, full-time jobs and good wages, the community agreed. However,

when the company arrived, the agreements were forgotten, many outside people were hired and the majority of positions are part-time. We mobilized, demonstrated and denounced in the press, the turn-about and the deception the community experienced. Myrna said that "when we go on demonstrations, like at Club Price, there are people who will say, 'Look at those fools!' But I think that every bit of publicity that we do outside that people will see, rubs off on people. It is not that they will understand 100%, but it gets people thinking."

We did not make great changes, but we did gain insight and knowledge that will help in future negotiations. This experience also reinforced our belief that the hopes for change in people's lives through work, is not likely to come from outside businesses.

We decided to read more on how other people regarded work and came back together to discuss the chapters "Work as Self-expression" and "Work and Social-relatedness" from Dorothee Soelle's book "To Work and To Love"¹⁹. We felt that many of the ideas were similar to our sense of what work should be like, but that is not the reality of most of the world. We also realized that for us, when work did become something that brought dignity and meaning in one's life, we no longer looked on it as "work".

Myrna said that she "never compared work to what was said

¹⁹ Soelle, Dorothee with Shirley A. Cloyes, *To Work and To Love - a theology of creation*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984.

about work in the bible before, but it really made sense. I am going to read the chapters again to think about it some more."

Donna had a very different feeling after reading these sections and said; "I felt quite depressed after reading it. Technology is moving in and I think that even if people do find employment, they are going to be just more like part of the machinery. I really felt by the end of the chapter about people finding work as self-expression and enjoyment in work, that I don't think they are going to get it. That is why I felt depressed about it. That is not going to happen and I really felt pessimistic."

Myrna went on to say; "Work should be a joy in our lives and it says in the book, that there is no joy in our lives without joy in work²⁰. Work should be enjoyable. People should be able to do the things they really like to do. You have to get pleasure out of something. If you are in this world, you should get some enjoyment. But not everybody is lucky enough. So many people work, just to work. Now I really enjoy what I am doing and how fortunate I am. Not many people can say that."

Melissa asked; "But then who would do all the jobs that nobody wants to do? I like the plan in China that she (Soelle) talks about, where they switched jobs. They rotated so that not one person had to do the job all the time that no

²⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

one wanted to do. Farmers went into the school and learned book work and education. The teachers went out to do the farm work. Everybody should enjoy some aspects of their work, but you can't enjoy everything about your work. I mean work is work. That is the whole point of it - it is work. To me, everything about it can't be enjoyable. I have worked in places I didn't like working, but I enjoyed the co-workers. There are other things that help you to enjoy your work such as good benefits and then you would have something to look forward to in the future or you could feel safe about the work. Even if you don't like your job, now you don't even feel secure. When I was reading this I was thinking about people losing their jobs and not feeling worthwhile. I think that it is so hard to get a job, just be happy you have one."

We talked about the writer's expectations of work, such as where she says, "I discovered the meaning of work in its three essential dimensions: self-expression, social-relatedness and reconciliation with nature by way of this experience."²¹ We felt that she had really left something out here. Work is also a means to survive. For us, that was the first thing. As Melissa said, "There are centuries of people who do jobs that they are not enjoying, but they are getting some fulfilment because they are bringing home the pay check or feeding their families. People are not usually able to express themselves in their work. They are just a machine

²¹ Ibid., p. 83.

that works for their company."

Faye agreed but said; "what she is pointing out is that if work is destroying people, then it is going against what God wants for us all. It is one thing to have hard work and unpleasant work, but it may not be destroying you. I was thinking of your mother, Elizabeth. You said that her cleaning work, every night for 30 years, was destroying for her. Even though it meant she could support the family and that was so important for her, that is not enough. Dorothee Soelle is saying that is not enough. It is like we are being sold a bill of goods now, that if you have a job you should not complain. If we start giving in to that, we are in danger. We are pushing for jobs all the time, but people should have jobs that treat them with dignity. It is more dangerous now than ever not to hold onto some of these ideas. We are not just created to be machines that are used by somebody else."

Myrna replied; "I had a hard time with that. I was thinking of the black people and all the slaves when I was reading it. I found it really heavy. I felt really bad because they were the workers and without them America would not have survived. The rich people would not have been rich without them. It says in the book that 'If we never experience the joy of life in our work, we never mature as full persons.'²² and I felt that it was true in a lot of ways.

²² Ibid., 84.

But it could be unpaid work at home. It could be bringing up your children or whatever you consider your work is."

Elizabeth said; "I started out in the rat-race, cleaning offices just like my mother did. Then I finally decided that there is more out there than this. It is hard to change though."

We know that many people feel that there are no options. On the welfare programs, like the Extra program, people are forced to do any work and they don't get self-worth or training out of it. But it depends how those projects are done, whether you gain some self-esteem from your work. There are Community Works programs for people who have to pay off a fine or a penalty for something they have done. Some people have benefitted from the experience and really have felt good about themselves afterwards. Myrna spoke about a youth who worked off his hours with the Day Camp. "We had a letter later on from his parents to say that was the best thing that had ever happened to him. He moved on to finish his education and he did something wonderful afterwards. He was included in the whole Day Camp team and that really made a difference. That is where community comes in and I really liked the section of the book that talked about people and community. You can't do one without the other. I really enjoyed that. I think that this was a great article. I enjoyed especially when she talked about work as community. I thought that was great."

Melissa jumped in with a practical reminder; "I think she somehow missed the work that goes into that community. It doesn't just happen. I think if by some miracle we got a big plant here in the Point, it started up and everybody got good jobs, I don't think people would ever forget the need for community. I think that because we have been down and out, and know how well the groups work together we wouldn't let it go."

Value and self-worth

In our discussions we have come back again and again to the value of much work that is done that is not paid employment. Rolly's years of work in Welfare advocacy after a heart condition that made him unable to work forced him on Welfare, is a marvellous example of changing understandings of work. The Women Against Contamination (W.A.C.) committee are finding a sense of purpose and worth through their research and involvement in this work to ensure a healthy environment.

The Women's Discussion Group spoke of the very significant changes in people's lives through volunteer work in responsible positions in the community. The group itself has also been a real vehicle for change through long term support and encouragement. One woman laughed as she recalled a very special victory; "Do you remember Joan talking about not being able to cook? She really couldn't cook anything.

She just opened tins for every meal. She cooked absolutely nothing, even though she had two children. It was a standing joke and everyone laughed about it. But then after awhile, the group started to take her on and help her deal with it. They brought in easy cookbooks. They phoned her to tell her step by step how to do things. I'll never forget her coming in saying, "I did it!" the first time she made a cake. She really learned how to cook and then invited the whole group to her home for a turkey dinner. The difference came when people really took her seriously. It was like a block and I don't think she would ever have got through it without the group. And she went on from there to deal with a lot of other problems." The change that we saw in Joan was really a source of hope for others in the group. They lived through someone breaking through a barrier in herself and also discovered the power that they had themselves to really make a difference in someone else's life.

Elizabeth spoke of how work had changed her and brought her new confidence in herself, but that it was not tied to salary. "Now that I've been working, I'm not the same. At Westmount Park School they call me a Teacher's Aid, but that's a phoney title. I'm not there for the teacher, I'm there for the kids. I am braver, and that's because of you. So I've told the teacher I'm not there just for her. Ten years ago I would not have done that. I have more confidence in myself than I have ever had and I have really changed.

"Even when I was working for P.A.C.E. and wasn't getting paid, I felt good about myself. You asked me why I have spent so much energy in P.A.C.E. over the years. I've never thought about why. I just see there is a need and I like to be able to contribute something for others. P.A.C.E. is important in the community now definitely. I guess it is the rewards too - you see somebody from the Reading and Writing class who can read now and it makes me feel good to be there and be a part of it. In the beginning P.A.C.E. was a commitment but if I left, somebody would take my place. But now it is a part of me and has brought my life real meaning. The hope is always there and God is the hope.

"This is where it is changing now, for my family. My children have grown up with P.A.C.E. They help out by making posters, pass out brochures door-to-door and in many other ways. It is amazing how they are involved! They go to Westmount Park School and they see what I do there as a Teacher's Aid and very often they ask how the kids were at school today. I think this is where we are changing things, with the next generation."

Melissa speaks of being a part of Saint Columba House for as long as she can remember. Being involved in community activities and the struggles to make it a better place, are a part of her life that must also be having its impact on her children. We realized that when we spoke of unpaid work and activities that give one a sense of self-worth, that the

connection to its value for the community makes all the difference. Otherwise it remains a way for an individual to develop, which is good, but is not rooted in the bigger picture. This larger struggle is the root of the hope that people find as they are engaged in the work for social change.

The empowerment of women

"If all the women rebelled, what would happen to the world? I'd like to tell people to do that. I wish we could just say - Okay women, that's it! Our work has to count, so just don't do all that stuff and see what would happen." ²³

In our community, it is mostly women who are involved in the organizations and groups that are working to change living conditions. We realize that, on the one hand, this makes our work easier because we really enjoy working with women and, on the other hand, the more we change and move forward on our own, the more difficult it will be to engage men and women together in the hard struggles ahead. But for now, we have focused on the particularly vulnerable position of women in an impoverished community and how we have felt empowered to take more and more responsibility for our families and our community.

It is definitely through involvement in hopes and goals beyond ourselves, that we have come back full circle to the question of who we are, as women. We accept our roles as wife, daughter, mother, and all too frequently, find out much

²³ Myrna Chamberlain

later that we have lost sight of who we are and wish to be. When we became involved in other goals, it challenged everyone else's expectations of us.

We discussed how these changes in ourselves have been affecting our relationships within our families.

Myrna spoke of how she feels put down by her family back home in New Brunswick - parents, brothers and sisters - who don't seem to understand the changes in her and don't understand her work with the Women's Group. Her daughter Melissa jumped in quickly to point out that "It is **WOMEN'S THINGS** (said with great emphasis!), that they don't understand. It is not that they don't understand, but they envy you for it and the women don't want to say too much because they might be heard. They don't deal with it. It is easier to ignore it than to get into an argument."

We discussed our impressions of the write-up from the Women's Discussion Group and some of the changes we had seen over the years. Donna spoke of a very important change that she had seen in how Myrna and Faye function as co-animators of the group. "For the past few years I have seen you (Myrna) taking over at times and I have sat back and thought, 'Wow, she is great to take initiative and to be leading and animating the group.'" Myrna appreciated the comment but said she still was uncomfortable about doing it. So the group reminded her of what a marvellous job she had done organizing the memorial service with the women on her own when Faye was

away. Myrna insisted that she had needed Faye's help to pull it together at the end, but it was clear that it was all set and all that she needed was just a little encouragement that it was going to work.

With great delight Donna recounted; "I had fun just standing there watching Myrna tell Faye what was planned and Faye just wrote it down. What a role reversal!" We all agreed that this was what our work in the group was all about and this was a great success.

Melissa said, "I found that I used to think that we accomplished a lot as a group, until we went to Mexico. I learned to appreciate the women's groups in Mexico and how much they worked together. When I came home I found myself saying - well that's my goal now, to work as a group for issues as much as they do. We are active here, but they have to struggle just for the basic rights. It was totally different. I wanted to learn more and more about them. It was so interesting. I didn't want to compare it, because it is a different situation altogether and it was a different environment. But I was envious of the women's group in Mexico.

"That is one reason I have become so involved in W.A.C. (Women Against Contamination). It is very important work. When I started, I never realized how big a job it was going to be and how much learning and research we would be involved in. I still feel that I am never going to know enough about it,

but we are learning together."

Donna commented; "A few years ago we went on a women's retreat and we talked about women's goals, the Bible and society. In the workshop discussion I realized that I had always taken it for granted that everybody had groups such as ours to go to. But after talking to one woman in the workshop about our Women's Discussion Group and Saint Columba House, she said 'Wow! We don't have anything like that.' Because of her saying that I came to appreciate and realize that it is not that common. I felt sorry for her that she didn't have such support or resources to fall back on. The conversation I had with her has always meant so much to me. Our group is very important."

Myrna added; "I think our Women's Group helps make our community a better community. I'm not saying it is perfect. If there is an issue that comes up, such as housing, or having to do with the streets, or rents, or our library, we really get involved. We work to make our community a better place to live."

Elizabeth responded; "When I read this about the Women's Group, it seemed a lot more important than I thought it was. I knew about the group, but you seem to be doing more than I thought. I didn't know that you actually went out in the community and did things. The only thing I knew about was going to the doctor, because I remember hearing about that. I really thought it was just discussion. I am getting the

impression that for a lot of the women they started out to just get out of the house and socialize, but it became more afterwards."

Faye replied; "All these years, we have pushed to get people to ask the first questions. It isn't necessarily to get involved in something, especially at the beginning. For instance last week we had a very good discussion that dealt with some very strong issues. We had an outline of a woman and each person had big circles on which they wrote what it meant to be a woman. We then attached them on the woman and talked about what it meant. It was a wonderful discussion and we built up the picture together - love, creativity, tenderness, confidence, menstruation, children, sexuality, strength, etc. Each woman discussed what the words meant for her. Somehow actually saying things, makes a difference."

Some members of the Women's Discussion Group were called names because they came to women's meetings and did things that were important for them. Women have been called lesbians and accused of getting together for other reasons. In our community this seems to be the way for men to put women down and not deal with problems that exist between men and women. They are afraid that they will lose their positions and their power. It is hard to take and sometimes people just back down.

Faye commented that "Whenever we push for change we know there is going to be a reaction and fear and resistance. Any

change forces other people to change. If we want to take more space, somebody has to give up space. Every time we try for change in the community, we know there is going to be resistance. So we had better understand who it will be and why. We hope we won't be producing changes where a lot of people are going to lose, but they may feel that they are going to lose."

Women are afraid to rock the boat and often live in fear. Some women spoke of being beaten when they pushed for their husbands to participate in domestic labour. For a lot of women who start pushing for that sharing, it is dangerous. But women are getting stronger.

We had all read an article by Meg Luxton called "Two Hands for the Clock - Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division of Labour in the Home",²⁴ and found that it really helped us identify what some of our problems in making these changes were. Some of our discussion brought out how we had changed, what obstacles we had met and that for some of us there is still a long way to go.

Elizabeth jumped in to say; "I'm the one hand for the clock. I don't have a second hand on it right now. I do not get help at home, whatsoever. So after reading this - boy! - I couldn't believe it. I work outside the home too, so I

²⁴ Luxton, Meg, "Two Hands for the Clock - Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division of Labour in the Home", in Luxton, Meg; Rosenberg, Harriet; Arat-Koc, Sedef, **Through the Kitchen Window - The Politics of Home and Family**, Garamond Press, Toronto, 1990.

should really get help at home too. But I always used to say well, my husband works too, so why should he do any dishes or anything? The kids were in school all day, so why should they really? But reading this really made me think. You know, we're going to have to have some changes! (Great laughter, thumbs up signs and encouragement from all! - "All right Liz!") Seriously though, I rush home between school and P.A.C.E. to make supper. Why can't one of them start supper? I don't think my husband has ever touched dishes in his life because that is the way his mother brought him up. So that is part of the problem, I'm sure. There are going to be some changes!"

We mentioned that there had been many discussions Elizabeth had been involved in about working for more equal sharing in the home and we wondered what had made the difference all of a sudden. She felt that reading about someone else with the same problem had really made a difference.

Myrna added; "Maybe you were ready to hear that now too. if you just read it cold, I don't think it would have done anything."

Elizabeth replied; "Maybe not. I am a little more vocal now and that makes a difference too." So often we have observed that taking on responsibility in one area of our life, began to push changes in many other ways.

Donna spoke of how reading the article was like a

flashback for her, to how life used to be. "The writer was talking about what women felt their place was in the home. These were women whose husbands are head of the household and the breadwinners, etc. That was me a few years ago. I honestly felt like they did about women going out into the workforce, getting their own jobs and speaking out, They were rocking the boat and that was why people were getting divorced. I really honestly felt that way and it made me rethink why. I grew up in a situation in which I did the dishes and my brothers didn't. There were two different sets of rules for boys and girls. I was encouraged to go ahead, but that difference was always there. It also goes back to the church and what was expected of us there. I really feel that the church depicted women as if they were to be subordinate to their husbands. It kept women in their place and this is all part of the patriarchal system.

"Now that I am working, Fred is Mr. Mom, except for the laundry. Reading this article started me thinking about the laundry. I always say I do the laundry because I like it, but I think it is really like some of you not wanting to share the kitchen. It is just a little bit of power. What if I just gave that to Fred? If Fred started doing the laundry I would have no housework left. I would feel very detached from the house. I wouldn't be needed. I made a little embroidery that said 'this is Donna's kitchen'. Fred insisted that I make a new one that says 'this is Fred's kitchen'. I told him I

would compromise and put up 'Fred and Donna's kitchen'." Change has its cost.

Elizabeth pointed out that we are making important changes with our children's image of what women do. "When you are working and involved in other important activities in the community the children look up to you more, I think. They think of you as being more than just a mother. My kids have often said, 'Mom, you're a Supermom. How do you do it?' I just do it because I want to and I don't have an answer for them. It is hard to explain, but they notice what you are doing and I think it makes a difference."

Melissa found the article very negative and did not like the portrayal of women as manipulative and tiptoeing around. There was little discussion about ways women have changed relationships and share work with their partners. Although the article was interesting, challenging and helpful in our discussion, we all felt that it seemed to be the result of a survey of middle-class women. Women who are on their own and those who live in poverty would not have answered in the same way.

Melissa insisted; "I think the women of the Point would come out a lot more independent and stronger. This book was from people who had money and husbands. The community here is different. It is survival. People are more independent and do what they do because they have to. If they stay home to look after their children, they collect welfare because they have

no choice. Society is not offering any other choice for them."

We came back to the goals that we have for women in our community, what has brought some change and what the next steps might be. We share, with women of other economic levels, the goal that women must have equal pay with men for equal work and that women's jobs should be paid as much as men's jobs of the same value. Of course we know that is the big catch - that word "value". But it is hard to get worked up about this as a goal when no one can get jobs of any type.

Women need work that they are going to benefit from, enjoy and be happy in, to get a sense of self-worth. So many women have given up trying to get jobs and those in the community who are working, are very often in assembly-line work. Very few women will find the way to develop self-confidence and independence through paid employment. We feel that we have been very fortunate in being paid to do work that we enjoy, that brings us a sense of power and responsibility over our lives, in settings that allow us a great deal of independence. However, it seems to us that there is limited chance that this will be possible for very many women in our community.

It is the work that women are actually doing now, that must be valued differently. For women who are at home raising their children, whether by choice or necessity, we must find ways to give them the help and support they need to

feel good about what they are doing. In groups such as the Women's Discussion Group, the School Committee and the Alternate School Parents Group, there is such openness to learn from each other. But sometimes it is such a struggle, there is so much pressure and it feels like there is no way out. The daily toll of living in poverty is so destructive and we searched for solutions that might decrease the terrible burden on so many families.

We talked about the real rebellion of women in Quebec in the sixties who stopped having the 10 or 12 children that had always been expected. Now Quebec has the lowest birth rate in Canada and the government is very concerned about this. A society needs children and the women in our community certainly want them. For many, children are their whole life. We asked the hard question of who should provide for these children and for the parents that are needed to care for them?

Since so many of the families are cared for by single parent women, there was a suggestion that fathers should be held responsible. A deluge of reasons - the fear of abuse from former partners, the lack of resources of many of the fathers of the children, and the unwillingness of many women, for the sake of money, to be back under the control of men they could not live with - made this a very unwelcome solution.

Many women do stay in relationships that are abusive and they have no hope of changing. We looked at what holds us

back from making changes and taking charge, and felt that most often it is fear. It is fear of change and fear of what might be lost. There is also a great fear of being alone and we recognized that a number of us had faced this. "It was fear that kept me in my other relationship. I was really nervous to actually make the step to leave. That's why you wait so long and put up with so much. It was so bad before, but once I left it was so easy. I didn't have any money, but not having to have a man come home and run me down, was like heaven to me. Decisions I made, even if they weren't the best, were made by me."

For the sake of their children and themselves, a lot of women choose not to have fathers involved and would rather live in poverty than continue a destructive relationship. We see this as a very important option that must be supported, but it remains unacceptable that so many women and children are punished so severely financially for this decision.

There were strong feelings that society, through government social programs should take responsibility for children. Compared to the many senseless things money is spent on, it is felt that we can afford to pay for children, if we get our priorities straight. After a lot of debate the following suggestion was made. Women should get paid a salary for raising children. A mother who chooses to go out to work, should receive an allowance for child costs as well. Whoever stays home to do this work - the mother, father, grandmother,

friend, sitter - should be paid. Family allowance is for the needs of the children, but the woman or other care-giver needs money to survive on as well.

It comes back to the discussion of Marilyn Waring's analysis that we must work on what we value in society and then find ways to supply the resources to support these values. Our part, we decided, is to help our community really value the work that is being done now by women (caring for children, for other family members, volunteering in community programs, etc.) and to encourage women themselves to recognize how important their "work" is. We have seen this awareness growing, but without the means to do this work well, women will just continue to be blamed for reproducing failure and poverty.

Education

This is a major goal for our work in the community. We saw how each of us had been changed through education in a larger sense. The involvement in the Alternate School had been a first step in our interest in the work of social change in our community. This school for 3 & 4 year old children is "alternate" in the sense that it requires the direct involvement of the parents in the school. Parents take their turns to work with the teacher in the classroom and there are weekly meetings of all parents to discuss community issues, health and education. Parents and children have activities to

promote learning together. So the education is focused not only on the child, but the whole family's involvement. In our community, where so many parents have not been able to go far in school, this can be a very important step in encouraging further involvement in education.

Melissa shared how important this has been for her and said, "I consider myself to be so lucky to have been able to participate in my children's pre-school years at the Alternative School. It has helped me learn how to spend good quality time with them. This year's new parent-child activity program has made such an impact on me and my daughter who is in the school now. Playing a real role in my children's education is something my children and I will never forget."

But it is more than formal education that is our goal. As Myrna said, "Education should be work on the gaps. It must be linked with work and respond to what people need to know."

The goal for P.A.C.E. was to use more challenging popular education methods from the beginning. But it is only now that we are starting to look at that. At the beginning nobody had the time. It was a fight to keep alive, to pressure the school board and the City to establish the centre with some stability. Now, eight years later, the time has come to start getting into the kind of education P.A.C.E. has wanted to do from the beginning. It took that long. It doesn't mean that the education hasn't been good all along. It has been wonderful and has had a powerful impact on so many people's

lives. But we have not been able to do all we had hoped for, in terms of being more involved in making changes in the community. Maybe things need to be relatively stable before you can move on to that.

Donna explained that this is the goal that P.A.C.E. has been working towards and why they are moving into popular education methods now in many of the classes. She said that "Popular Education is empowerment for change". You can't give people empowerment but it can come through their engagement in activities or groups that understand this as their goal.

Myrna agreed and went on to say; "It is giving people a chance to change. It is awareness. It kind of all goes together. But it is not forced on people or sneaked in, but happens in everyday involvement. Like at P.A.C.E., it is not something forced on them, but education that relates to their own lives. It is work on people's self-worth for themselves. People are the important part of our life and community."

Education in all its forms has been so vital for us all in helping us to both change personally and to follow our goals for the community. We need to continue to develop participatory learning in both direct education (P.A.C.E and Alternate School) and the more informal learning that goes on in many of the programs that are aimed at developing a knowledgeable community base.

Community building

The weekly Community Lunch program time at Saint Columba House is a place where the activities, struggles and goals of the Point are discussed. There are education sessions on Welfare Rights, the Social Reform policy, housing problems, legal rights, Women's Concerns and the needs of youth. These are often animated by community groups and the goal is to develop a broader awareness of all that is going on in the community and the outside forces that affect us.

This program has only been going for two years now and we discussed the effect it has already had on building community. Melissa is very enthusiastic about its impact and commented "We are getting so many people now. When it first started, a lot of people thought it was just a meal for families on social assistance and they were embarrassed to come. Even though they may be on welfare themselves, they don't want to be labelled. Now that it is known that everyone is welcome to come, it really helps. People are coming because they can afford it and it is a full hot meal.

"Besides the food, it has become a place where people of all ages come to meet each other, to find support and just be together. I find that a lot of people who don't usually have that chance, get the opportunity to mix with other people. They might not be the type to go to a demonstration, but now they are becoming more at ease about being involved, through the Community Lunch program. We have also brought up issues

that would not normally be brought up in other large centres, like drugs, racism, violence against women, International Women's Day. I find it is like having a live, weekly Newsletter through this program."

We have seen a steady growth in active participation in the animation time over the past two years and people who never expressed themselves before publicly are now willing to take the microphone and enter into the discussion. There are new people coming who have never been involved in community groups and they, in turn, are bringing others. People involved in community projects have a place to discuss their goals, their hopes and their struggles. This sharing is both producing change in those who are learning to speak of their work and building up hope within the community as we speak of these visions together.

There have also been significant changes in relationships between francophones and anglophones who come in contact through this lunch program. Animation is usually done in English, but there are people sitting nearby ready to translate when needed. Sometimes presentations are in both languages and since we invite different groups to use this gathering as a place to mobilize or educate, we have more input now from groups that function only in French. This has increased their awareness of the significant anglophone population and together we are building a stronger base.

As we talked, we recounted the changes that we see in the

larger community. With socio-economic conditions worsening and every indication that this trend will continue, there has been an intentional strategic shift that has put the focus on encouraging collective involvement and finding ways to build community. Action Watchdog, the coalition of community groups, in addition to organizing sessions on the Social Reform (which over 300 people attended) and electoral candidate debates, has planned wonderful community celebrations such as "Festi-Pointe", Hot Dogs in the Park, Corn Roast.

On a larger scale, the "Bread and Roses - Women's March Against Poverty" that began May 26 and ended ten days later in Quebec City on June 4, 1995, has brought us all new energy and hope. Women of all ages, races, cultural backgrounds, languages and social classes joined together in a common cause. As we arrived at the Olympic Park at the end of the first morning of the march, we were greeted with tables of home-baked bread with beautiful roses interspersed. As thousands of people rested on the grass sharing the warm bread and lunches, someone commented that it was like the biblical story of the feeding of the five thousand. We were truly blessed!

For all who participated in any way in the ten day march - through discussing the objectives in community groups for months ahead, walking together along the highway, welcoming women in their homes along the way or joining with the 20,000

people on that final wonderful afternoon when the 800 women marchers arrived in Quebec - this will remain as a milestone in our fight against poverty. The songs of solidarity came alive!

As we shared many other ways the community has found to pull together and looked for the resources amongst themselves to make life better, Myrna commented; "When we go back and think of where the community came from, how it has struggled and where it is today, it is very impressive. It is the struggle of the people to survive. That is the hope!"

HOPE as the seed for transformation

In the present socio-economic crisis in our country, we see no signs of hope that there is a will or determination to work for a more just society. Even as we see the importance of people finding self-worth in non-paid work, we know that this is not the way it should or could be. We are very fearful that the continuing cut-backs in social programs and support for people who do not have paid employment will push people to spend more and more energy on mere survival. This is an enormous challenge to impoverished communities like ours. Community building is essential if we are to survive this onslaught and continue to be a community with spirit and hope.

Involvement in the community is like the groundwork for change. Through the day to day work together, we have seen

that people begin to believe that their work is needed and that they can make a difference. This can only happen where hope already exists for a better future and in acting on this conviction, hope is seen.

How one maintains this hope in the midst of a society engaged in dismantling the social networks we have had, has been an ongoing concern for the Worship Group. We have wrestled with a passage that seems to us to lift up this hard reality and challenge us to find a kernel of hope in a very bleak context. Jesus told his disciples the Parable of the Gold Coins at the end of his ministry and it raises many questions for us.

Jesus continued and told them a parable. He was now almost at Jerusalem, and they supposed that the Kingdom of God was just about to appear. So he said, 'There was once a man of high rank who was going to a country far away to be made king, after which he planned to come back home. Before he left, he called his ten servants and gave them each a gold coin and told them, 'see what you can earn with this while I am gone.' Now his countrymen hated him, and so they sent messengers after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.'

"The man was made king and came back. At once he ordered his servants to appear before him, in order to find out how much they had earned. The first one came and said, 'Sir, I have earned ten gold coins with the one you gave me.' 'Well done,' he said; 'you are a good servant! Since you were faithful in small matters, I will put you in charge of ten cities.'..... Another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your gold coin; I kept it hidden in a handkerchief. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take what is not yours and reap what you did not plant'. He said to him, 'you bad servant! I will use your own words to condemn you! You know that I am a hard man, taking what is not mine and reaping what I have not planted. Well, then, why didn't you put my money in the bank? Then I would have received it back

with interest when I returned.' Then he said to those who were standing there, 'Take the gold coin away from him and give it to the servant who has ten coins.' But they said to him, 'Sir, he already has ten coins!' 'I tell you,' he replied, 'that to every person who has something, even more will be given; but the person who has nothing, even the little that he has will be taken away from him. Now, as for those enemies of mine who did not want me to be their king, bring them here and kill them in my presence!

(Luke 19: 11-27)

When we first discussed this passage, Donna responded very emphatically; "There is no hope! Jesus' parables always have a happy ending, but this one does not. It started off saying that the people thought Jesus was going to tell them what heaven was like, but he told them this. This is the opposite of what he usually does, which is to teach something, give hope, present a moral to a story. But this doesn't have that. It sounds just like what is happening today. The people didn't want this man to be king, but he became king anyway. It is like our governments that we didn't want in the first place. Then the king condemns all those who were against him."

Myrna was also disturbed by the passage and commented; "It is also very frightening and threatening. It seems like today. The rich get rich and the poor get poorer. That is what it says at the end of the passage. When you have money, you just want to make more. It is a vicious circle. It is like with education. If you have a good education, you can get a good job. If you have poor education, you get a poor job and you can't go on to get education."

Faye added; "I was struck with how straightforward that servant was who said that he was afraid of the king because he was a hard man. It is like people here who say things straight out about what it is like in our country."

Melissa interjected; "I see it, not as government, but as someone who is crooked who controls others. The servant that lost the money at the end didn't want to be involved in the action whatsoever, because it was crooked. It is like the poor people who stand up for what they believe."

This brought the discussion into our own community and Myrna commented; "It took tremendous courage for the one man to stand up and say that he was scared of him. It sounds like the welfare people and the 'Boubou Macoutes' (the welfare investigators in Quebec who have the legal right to pry into people's private lives and to demand information from neighbours, priests, bankers, corner store owners, etc. about welfare recipients). They have the power to say whether you will get a cheque or if you are going to get cut off welfare. People can't always be as honest as they would like to be. Our system is set up to keep people down. When I went to Mexico and Bolivia, I realized that their governments wanted to keep the people down. I hadn't realized it as clearly before, but now I see how much our government wants to keep us down too."

We came back to this passage many, many times, because it bothered us so much. We began to understand it differently.

Donna pointed out the importance of the passages that came before and after this parable. Jesus had just encountered Zaccheus, the rich tax collector, who decided to give half his belongings to the poor and pay back all those he had cheated. The passage right after is Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The people were looking for a miracle or a magic solution.

Donna suggested; "I think Jesus was trying to say this is the real world. This is it! This parable is about how it is and you are living it now. The people believed the Kingdom of God is about to appear and everything is going to be 'Wow!'. Everything is going to be cool now! Jesus is here and we are going to have a new world. But in this parable he is saying that this is life. This is how it is. The rich are going to get richer and the poor are getting poorer. People are going to get into power that shouldn't be in power because they don't respect others and are only out for themselves."

Faye added; "The enemies of the king were killed. When Jesus went to Jerusalem, he was like an enemy to the king. It seems that the king is used symbolically to speak of the leaders. Jesus stood up to the unjust leaders in the state and in his religious community, and he was killed for it."

Myrna responded; "It is like Martin Luther King and others who have stood up for the rights of the people and are killed for it."

Faye said; "Zaccheus had a personal conversion and gave

half his money to the poor. That was great for Zaccheus and he said if he cheated anyone he would pay them back. But that didn't change why people were poor. The system remained the same. We don't know how Zaccheus got rich."

Myrna quickly added; "But he still had enough left for himself. Some people give donations to help out, but if it doesn't change the basic problem, it won't change very much."

Faye went on to say; "In the parable, the man who spoke out against the king said, 'you take what is not yours' and that is a very important factor."

Myrna followed this up, asking; "Where did the money come from in the first place? How is that king's money earned? It could be taxes. It could be just going in, slaughtering people and taking what he wanted."

We discussed how this was similar to what went on in Mexico. We had heard about the maquiladores, the factories where people have to work seven days a week, twelve hour shifts, day in and day out. They are destroyed and yet earn very small wages. A lot of money is gained, but the workers are not getting it. The owners and large corporations are reaping big profits. If the workers complain or join groups such as the FAT (the worker's rights association), they are like this man in the parable denouncing what is not right and being punished.

When we have used this passage in Bible Study with other

church groups, they have been surprised that this is not a passage about using talents. The last part of the parable is so shocking where it says, 'to every person who has something, even more will be given; but the person who has nothing, even the little that he has will be taken away from him.' It feels similar to what is happening now with the social programs being chipped away bit by bit. People are holding on by their fingernails and the little they have is going to be taken away.

So where is the hope?

Donna replied with great heaviness; "There isn't any. That is what is so depressing. Except for that one man who stood up and his very own words were used to condemn him. He is telling this bad king that he is taking away from people what does not belong to him."

Myrna interjected; "But if he said that in front of people to this king, then he is getting other people to think about what he said. He does not remain quiet. You are going to get people thinking about what is going on, but you will be in the owner's bad books. So that is what he did. The other people around would see what he did."

Elizabeth said; "He spoke up, but looked what happened. I don't like this parable."

Faye asked; "This is a parable. Why is Jesus telling it? Where is Jesus' word of hope in it?"

After a long, heavy silence Myrna replied; "Jesus is in

the struggle of those people who stand up for what they believe. Every time we read this passage, we get something new out of it and it brings strength. This passage continues and goes on and on. It is not just a story, but a continuation of people who are rich and how they keep people down. It goes on and we learn something every time we read it. Nelson Mandela could have retracted and got out of jail, but he held on for all those years. The people remember that. The Jewish people have suffered so much over the years and so many have died. But they continue to struggle and there is hope in that."

Elizabeth agreed and said; "That is where the hope is. It is in the man who stood up and spoke."

Faye added; "Jesus stood up again and again for the rights of the people. He confronted the system that made more poverty and abused the people. He got killed, but that doesn't mean there is no hope in it. The hope is not necessarily tied to success, but that it is enough to stand up. Sometimes it is all that you can do. Even if you can't win, there is something that happens when we take a stand."

"The hope goes on", Myrna declared. "The story went on after. Imagine the talking that must have gone after and how the story spread out!"

Our collective stories are so connected to this tough parable and we have now seen it as a reality check and a challenge to never use the word "hope" lightly.

Changes in the Women's Collective

Over the past two years we have talked, written, shared our stories and dug deep into our past experiences within our families, our community and the groups we are involved in that are working for social change. Our dialogues and seeing our own words in print has had a profound impact on us all. At the end of this work together, we decided to talk about what we have learned together and the effect that the writing of this book has had on each of us.

For all of us it has been an overwhelming experience. We feel very close to one another and have shared things we have never spoken of before. We all excitedly jumped in with how we have been affected by our work together and how important it has been for us. There were comments that we feel important now and that we have come to realize in new ways the importance of the work we have been doing in the community over the years. We have seen the connection between everything we do - our family, work, worship, projects and the life of the community.

We have also been changed by our writing together. Elizabeth said; "I am talking more now. I am not afraid to any more. I am talking out more than I ever thought I would. My heart used to pound when I was speaking and it doesn't any more. The two years working on the book have helped."

Melissa talked about how different the experience was than she thought it would be and that she (like the rest of

us) didn't think we would still be at it two years later. She said; "I feel more educated now. We are opening our eyes to things around us that we never thought about before. I found that my family is educated more since I have been involved in the book. I never talked about what I did, but slowly now I talk more about it, because of the book. I was worried about how people in the community would respond to it. I think we have spoken very honestly. We were worried about people being degraded, but I think that what comes through is the strength of the community. So I am not worried about it now."

Myrna commented that a few weeks ago she got up in the middle of the night and wrote down her feelings about writing this book together. We urged her to share her thoughts with us and this is an excerpt from her writing:

When we talked about this project, it was a dream. I often wondered as I was growing up what it would be like to write a book or for that matter have anything to do with one. I used to think how smart a person is to be able to write something people will read. Then when the idea came up, it was still a dream. A wonderful idea, but what could I possibly write about. Even as we worked, the other women and myself, I never could see who would want to hear our stories.

As we worked together and our lives went down on paper, it wasn't just all talk. We all lived those stories. We felt each other's pain, sorrow and happiness. How each of us had respect for each other and our community and families. As we wrote down the stories, they were real. Out of the paper came a reinforcement that gave us such courage and hope. I hope our stories do get published. Maybe other women will get hope and strength to carry on to make our community and world a better place to live.

What amazes me is how everything we have written about makes the circle of life. Even my hard times, the struggles, friendships, all go

together. It would be nice to have a perfect world, but we have wonderful people. We just have to open our eyes to see.

Through our writing collective, our eyes have been opened to new insights about our work and struggle. The circle goes around, as Myrna often says - an intertwining spiral of experience, analysis, action and reflection. At the core of it all is the powerful sense of the presence of God who is with us in the midst of the struggle.

It is not by chance that we are a group of women who have gathered as a collective to discuss and reflect on our work for social change. We are the primary victims of poverty. We live and deal daily with the life-destroying effects of poverty on our children and families. We have taken on a responsibility to try to change society, to stand up to violence and abuse, to create places where we and our neighbours can learn, to create good jobs that pay fair wages and are good for our community. In all this struggle we have found a hope that gives life meaning and that has been at the root of all that has helped to build our community. That hope is everything!

PART II

CHAPTER ONE

The Search for a Methodology of " Feminist Liberative Ethics"

In my study of the literature in areas such as feminism, social and economic policy, liberation theology, class analysis and feminist ethical theory, it has become increasingly apparent to me that the question of method is crucial. The results of any investigation or reflection will be prejudiced, not only by the basic assumptions, historical data and experience that has been considered, but by the fundamental epistemological understandings that will influence the method employed. Feminist social ethics, regardless of the political stance from which it arises,²⁵ takes as its

²⁵ Carol S. Robb, in her article "A Framework for Feminist Ethics", The Journal of Religious Ethics (Spring 1981), has suggested that four contemporary social-political analyses that are representative of major feminist political formations in the women's movement, are Radical Feminism, Sex-rolism, Marxist-Leninist Feminism and Socialist Feminism. Adamson, Briskin and McPhail, in their work Feminist Organizing for Change - the contemporary Women's Movement in Canada (Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1988, pp. 9 - 16, 190 - 194), have proposed three categories in the feminist movement to be Radical Feminism, Liberal Feminism and Socialist Feminism. Although the lines are not always clearly defined, it is important to identify the political stance from which one speaks as a feminist.

starting point the concrete experience of women's lives. In engaging in feminist social ethics, the voices of those who have traditionally been unheard or have been interpreted through others, must find their place in articulating the problems that they identify must be addressed, in analysing the root causes of their oppression, and in seeking out solutions to eradicate oppression.

Janet Silman, in her thesis "A Woman's View from Within - Indian Women as Moral Agents of Change in Canada"²⁶ speaks of her "search for a liberative ethic and more specifically, the search for a method to discern moral wisdom in the refiner's fire of people's everyday lives". She discusses the importance of the ethical debate being rooted in the daily lives of those most affected by the discourse. I wish to take this one step further with the conviction that the discernment of the "moral wisdom in the refiner's fire" is best done by those in the fire. For this reason, the method employed in this thesis and the search for a collaborative model of reflection is in itself the ethical challenge in developing a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

1. Underlying Assumptions that Inform the Method

²⁶ Silman, Janet, *A Woman's View from Within - Indian Women as Moral Agents of Change in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, 1989, p. 3.

The method employed arises out of my socialist²⁷ feminist Christian perspective that recognizes that women's struggles for hope and dignity in our impoverished community are inextricably related to (1) a feminist analysis that explores the patriarchal power²⁸ structures that affect both the

²⁷ I identify my own political stance as a socialist feminist as the term is used by Adamson, Briskin, McPhail, op. cit., which is "centred on a vision of fundamental social transformation in which existing relations of power, institutions, and ideological practices would be replaced by an alternative set of structures" (p. 193) and an approach to change that is both collective and participatory. The interaction of feminist, socialist and Christian concerns is discussed by Carolyn Sharp in her thesis Listening to Women and Speaking of God: Grounding the Question of God in the Lives of Working Class Women in Québec, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, 1993. She quotes from an article by Judith Dufour, "Christianisme, féminisme et socialisme", in which she identifies herself in the following way:

Je suis socialiste parce que je suis chrétiennement solidaire des mes soeurs et frères humains que Dieu a créés égaux en dignité... Je suis chrétienne parce que le project socialiste me permet de donner un sens à l'expérience historique vécue par Dieu fait homme dans un climat politique et social donné et rapportée par le message évangélique... Je suis aussi féministe parce que l'analyse marxiste de la société capitaliste m'a appris à quel point cette organisation sociale a besoin, pour fonctionner de surajouter à l'exploitation économique, l'oppression sexiste. Enfin je suis féministe parce que je suis chrétiennement solidaire de mes soeurs que Dieu créa égales en dignité avec mes frères. (p. 63)

She has expressed in a very powerful way, my own understanding of the interconnections of solidarity and the world-view out of which I function.

²⁸ "The term patriarchy is defined as encompassing the web of intersecting patterns of oppression which find systemic expression in racism, classism, imperialism and other relationships of domination, as well as in the sexism to which the term seems more apparently to refer." Thistelthwaite, S. B. & Engels, M. P., editors; Lift Every Voice; Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside, Harper & Row, 1990,

inter-personal and public place of women within society, (2) a feminist theology that informs a re-reading of the Bible and an articulation of faith that arises out of reflection on the daily context of women's lives, (3) a socio-economic analysis of the global power of advanced capitalism²⁹ that underlies the impoverishment of a "Third World" community within the "First World" and (4) the importance of developing a liberative ethics that arises out of the lived experience of this community in its struggle to be faithful.

The concept "feminist liberative ethics" requires that the method employed must not only involve the participants in ethical reflection, but must also be a process that brings new energy and hope in their ongoing engagement in the work of

p. 290. This broad definition provides a helpful, comprehensive base from which women in our community can analyze the roots of the powerlessness they experience.

²⁹ In her article "The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics - Reconsidering the Case for Marxian Political Economy", Beverly Harrison addresses the lack of inclusion of economic justice in religious social theory, how the writings of Weber and Niebuhr have served to mask an analysis of the devastating effects of the current global market system and the need for religious ethicists to evaluate the capacity of this corporate market economy to meet the needs of peoples. She states that "Sustaining a centralized global advanced industrial capitalist system is bringing death to all but a few on our planet.....Enabling people to understand this reality and to recover a capacity to long for economic justice as deeply as we desire political justice is the task of religious ethics today." (Harrison, Beverly Wildung, Making Connections - Essays in Feminist Socialist Ethics, Beacon Press, 1985, p. 80)

social transformation.³⁰ I believe that a liberative ethic must have as its goal, this transforming and empowering objective, and the method will be judged on this criterion by the participants themselves. Out of the actual practise of engagement in feminist liberative ethics, a method will evolve and be developed.

It is important that the ordinary language of the people be maintained in the process of engaging in ethical reflection, so that the articulation of their vision, struggles, conflict and theology that arises out of their everyday struggles is respected and will in turn, be understood by their community.

The specificity of the community and the particularity of the groups considered in this study are both its strength and its weakness. A feminist liberative ethic must emerge from the concrete actions and reflections of a community in ways that bear similarity to the locus of liberation theologies. As Sharon Welch points out, "The primary content of liberation theologies - the description of a community's struggle for transformation in response to the ideal of solidarity - is more properly understood as a method, a process of

³⁰ We are much indebted to the foundational work of Paulo Freire, in this area, where "consciousness raising" is a significant entry point. Freire sees this work as indivisible from engagement in transformative action and defines *conscientização* as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." (Freire, Paulo, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Seabury Press, New York, 1970, p. 19.

inclusiveness and of focus on specific historical structures of existence."³¹ Developing a method that adheres to the principles one espouses, to strengthen a community's struggle for transformation - is the challenge this project faced.

2. Feminist Liberative Ethics

In developing a methodology of feminist liberative ethics, I am greatly indebted to the learning, directions and insight from those working from a feminist perspective in the fields of methodology, liberation theology, feminist theology, sociology and ethics. Literature from each of these fields will be selected on the basis of the challenges or questions they pose to the method I have used and the possible challenge my process could raise in their analysis.

(i) Methodology

Carol Robb reviews the wide range of methodological perspectives in her article "A Framework for Feminist Ethics".³² She suggests that there is a

nearly consistent tendency for feminist ethicists to take as their starting points reflection upon very concrete situations. This procedure is one way, and a main way, in which dominant ideology is unmasked. In this procedure there is a commonality or at least a basis for commonality with those who

³¹ Welch, Sharon, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity - A Feminist Theology of Liberation, Orbis, Maryknoll, N.Y., 1985, p. 26.

³² Robb, op. cit.

articulate ethical reflections from other oppressed groups³³.

The methodology that leads to the theological/ethical reflections of the women from Point St. Charles is based on this premise that their own concrete situation will be the starting point for reflection. Sufficient care and time must be taken to enable those who have not been heard, to speak of their hopes and struggles out of their particular context. Identifying commonalities with other communities in struggle, may be helpful in strengthening or bringing new insights to a community, but must not be allowed to unduly influence the process of a community's self-understanding. In a discussion of liberation social ethics methodology, Harrison points out that "The particularity, as well as the political precariousness of liberation praxis, gives the properly socioethical work of liberation theology a different cast from the genre of abstract, formalistic ethics characteristic of dominant Christian groups."³⁴ The creative connections between particularity and commonality will be explored through a consideration of the effects of the experience of the Women's Collective in Mexico on their work back home.³⁵

Engaging in an overview of the points of convergence and divergence in methods of feminist ethics, Robb points out that

³³ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁴ Harrison, op. cit., p. 248.

³⁵ See Part I, Chapter Six and further discussion in Part II, Chapters Two and Five.

while all feminist ethics begins with or assumes a criticism of the historical, including contemporary, roles of women in society, or a complaint about those roles, the attempt to understand the grounds for the criticism and the requirements for liberation requires analysis. Because the analyses of the roots of women's oppression yield such divergent normative stances, I will make the case that this particular factor is heavily weighted in relation to all the other factors.³⁶

For this reason, I feel that it is mandatory that the assumptions or premises that undergird one's understanding of feminism must be clear (See discussion on Underlying Assumptions that inform the methodology)³⁷.

A methodology of feminist liberative ethics cannot provide a universal method applicable to these divergent normative stances, but can offer models and guidelines of ways in which a community can engage in an analysis of the oppression they experience, identify the resources that enable them to resist and clarify their understanding of what is liberative for them.

In the book Women's words - The Feminist Practice of Oral History³⁸, a gathering of women trained in the fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, folklore and linguistics have raised questions of methodology that arise

³⁶ Robb, op. cit., p. 49

³⁷ p. 226.

³⁸ Gluck, Sherna Berger; Patai, Daphne, editors, Women's Words - The Feminist Practice of Oral History, Routledge, New York, 1991.

from the basic principle that feminist research is "research by, about, and for women". They have asked hard questions about who really benefits from their research, even when it is done with respect for the subjects they are studying.

In rejecting traditional practices rooted in assumptions of the researcher's separateness, neutrality, and distance from the subjects of research, feminist discourse has emphasized, instead, commonality, empathy, and sisterhood. These assumptions also often collide with the realities of actual research situations.³⁹

The ethical questions that they raise are very relevant to my work in developing a method of feminist liberative ethics and these issues will be addressed in chapters two and three.

In the introduction to the section on "Authority and Interpretation", the editors state that

As we move from the problems of interviewing to those of interpretation of the resulting text, the oral history process seems progressively to efface the original narrator and diminish her control over her own words. Once the tape has been converted into a text, what at first may have appeared to be an immediately accessible account of a life or an episode, with the speaker as the ultimate authority, becomes a site of interpretive conflict.⁴⁰

Although the study I am engaged in has involved the Women's Collective in interpretation and selection, as I move into a scholarly reflection of this work I am very aware of the tension between engaging in an objective assessment of the work in the light of feminist literature and the desire to

³⁹ Ibid., p. 109.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

maintain my very subjective stance within the collective.⁴¹ My commitment to continue to share the development of the thesis work with the group of women is an attempt to avoid such interpretive conflict.

However, the experience of Laurie Mercier and Mary Murphy, which combined scholarly collaboration and community outreach in a project called "Molders & Shapers, Montana Women as community Builders: An Oral History Sampler & Guide", brought them to a different conclusion. They had anticipated ongoing collaboration and involvement in the researching, analysis and writing of the final text, but were disappointed in the response they encountered. "Community women were perfectly willing to help us create interviews, and they were pleased that they were the subject of our attentions. Nevertheless, we were seen as professionals validating their experience and history. That was not their job."⁴² This has

⁴¹ Ibid., Daphne Patai, in her article "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" speaks of this tension and dual allegiance. "Whether we adopt a broad or a narrow definition of feminism, if the term is to have any meaning it must involve a critique of traditional concepts and structures that have marginalized women materially and psychologically, in the world and even in their own souls. It must also ultimately aim at social transformation. . . .The ethical problems of using other women as the subjects of our research become an immediate source of tension. For it is a fact that we are confronted by dual allegiances. On the one hand, we are obligated to our academic disciplines and institutions. . . . On the other hand, if we take feminism seriously, it commits us to a transformative politics." p. 138

⁴² Ibid., p. 183

not been my experience with the women of the collective, who maintained their interest in participating in all stages of reflection and production of our book. It will be very important to assess to what extent this is a factor in our project of feminist liberative ethics and whether my role within the academia will prove to be an asset or a liability to the community.

It has been my conviction that the hours and the risks involved in the writing of our book are justified, so long as it has been an experience that has added to understanding of our work in the community, has encouraged both personal and community empowerment and has been the grounds for ongoing resistance. Nevertheless, however productive this has been, the inequities of power and privilege are evident as the book and reflections become the source of further academic work. Daphne Patai raises these concerns:

As in any asymmetrical exchange, exploitation is always a possibility....Even where empowerment does occur, as indeed it may, is it a justification for the appropriation that occurs along with it? The only projects that avoid these problems are those that are at all stages genuinely in the control of a community, with the community assuming the role of both researched and researcher.⁴³

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 146, 147. Patai warns of the need for clarity in our motivation as she raises a further consideration. "The researcher's desire to act out feminist commitments, relinquish control, and involve the researched in all stages of the project runs the risk, however, of subtly translating into the researcher's own demand for affirmation and validation.....we must guard against foisting onto others a demand or a wish for reinforcement in our work and our concerns. Otherwise, researchers may find themselves abdicating their intellectual responsibilities and training,

Such ethical questions must not be avoided and in the evaluation of the method of feminist liberative ethics presented, I will discuss the steps we have taken to address these issues of exploitation and the danger of appropriation.

However, in addition to the demanding nature of the questions Patai has raised, she quite rightly reminds us that

Feminism, however, should not be turned into a cudgel used against ourselves or others; nor should it be a bromide allowing researchers to proceed behind the screen of an uncritical notion of sisterhood... In an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research.⁴⁴

The complex realities of socio-economic factors, gender biased educational systems, sex roles and class discrimination are some of the factors that have determined the social conditions of the women of the collective and in our community. I agree with Patai that we are not able, through our research methods to correct such inequities. However, in the academia there needs to be a heightened awareness of these factors and an acceptance of the responsibility to produce conditions that do not permit the perpetuation and reinforcement of such unequal power. In our community work, we are engaged in addressing the socio-political roots of these problems and the production of our book offers a method based on collective ownership of research.

in perpetual pursuit of their subjects' approval."

I do not feel that the pursuit of "approval" has been a problem for me, but there is a danger of silencing one's own voice.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

A theological reflection, "Margin to Centre"⁴⁵ was both a catalyst and framework for the method of feminist liberative ethics employed in the writing of the book "Hope is the Struggle". This article explored the interplay between engagement in the work of social change and theological reflection on this engagement over a period of many years, leading to a major theological shift that was a "moment" of transformation. In the same way, ethical reflection on the process of social transformation and the changing of values that is concomitant with active engagement, will explore the question of the interplay between action and reflection.

The method employed in this process of theological reflection has been the experiential base⁴⁶ from which to

⁴⁵ This article was written in 1990 as a formulation of my understanding of Christology that had emerged through my engagement and theological reflection with people of our community.

⁴⁶ Out of my own commitment to search for a theology that was liberating in our context, I had worked over a period of eight years, to develop a method of re-reading scripture that gave precedence to the experience of struggle of those in the group. As they became confident in trusting what they knew through their experience, they brought startling new meanings and interpretations of faith that I had never perceived. Their reflections and new understandings have produced a new sense of claiming authority for their own lives and their ability as interpreters.

In writing the account of "Margin to Centre", I worked on a collaborative model in which I related their stories and reflections. When the women read the article, I was overwhelmed at the powerful effect of seeing their experience in written form. They felt that this reflected what they had said, but were amazed at the power the stories had when they were brought together in a structured way. This written material has helped them to build a more analytical understanding of the liberative theological method they have been engaged in and they have built on this material to

develop a method of feminist liberative ethics and a methodology that will enable further exploration of the process of social transformation, what enables or encourages the empowerment of women and their own role as moral agents.

(ii) Liberation Theologies

The decisive factor in liberation theology is the context in which one does theology and this significantly shapes the method, content and structure of theology. Although there are common bonds between the liberation theology of Blacks, Feminists, Womanists, Latin Americans, Native Americans, Minjung, etc., it is the distinctive nature of these theologies as they reflect their diversity and particularity, that is crucial to their understanding. I will specifically address Latin American, Feminist and Mujerista liberation theologies to seek the wisdom they offer to my project and the questions I have raised, that will be addressed from the method and methodology of feminist liberative ethics I am proposing.

In an historical critique of the social theory of religion⁴⁷, Victoria Lee Erickson poses questions about the

prepare for sharing their experiences with theological students and church members. The learning from this experience of empowerment and transformation has guided the development of the method we have employed in the process of writing the book.

⁴⁷ Erickson, Victoria Lee, Where Silence Speaks - Feminism, Social Theory, and Religion, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993.

difficulties and dangers of North Americans adopting or adapting liberation theology theory from Latin America. However, in the history of theological movements for liberation, Latin American liberation theology has been a catalyst that has provided a base of analysis that has been germinal in the field.

The Base Christian Communities have challenged theology and the commitment of the church to engage in radical, fundamental change that will confront the conditions of oppression. The very fact that such a theology has fundamentally questioned its own institution, the Roman Catholic Church, has been one of the factors that threatens their ongoing development.⁴⁸

These communities have been our teachers through writings such as The Gospel of Solentiname⁴⁹ and through direct encounter in our exchanges in Mexico. Latin American

⁴⁸ Ibid., see Chapter 9, "Resisting the Sacred", pp. 165-188. and Boff, Leonardo, Church: Charism & Power - Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church, in which Boff describes the development of the base communities and the role of the laity in rebuilding the church with materials arising from the grassroots communities and often incorporating popular religiosity which is "how they have been able to resist centuries of political and economic oppression and ecclesial marginalization" (p. 130).

⁴⁹ Cardenal, Ernesto, The Gospel in Solentiname, Volumes 1 to 4, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1978 to 1982. These books are transcripts of the theological reflections of a base community in Solentiname, during the time of the revolutionary process that led to the 1979 Triumph in Nicaragua. The method employed by Cardenal and my own visits to base communities in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Salvadorean refugee camps, have been the basis of the biblical/theological reflection method we have used in the Worship Group since 1983.

liberation theology offers the tools of analysis that encourage a socio-political reading of scripture from within the experience of oppression of a community, that leads to strategies and concrete community engagement to bring about social change.

However, a criticism that must be made, is that the interpretation and writing of this theology still remains in the control of the theologians. Sharon Welch points out that "the terms used by liberation theologians often belie the revolutionary significance of their knowledge. Their language is that of traditional theology."⁵⁰ I have seen the limitations this has imposed in developing a theology that arises from the concrete conditions of communities. A method that is liberative must go beyond a reformulation of basic traditional concepts, to encourage the use of language and the development of theological concepts that arise out of a community's experience. Gustavo Gutierrez discusses this problem in the conclusion of his book A Theology of Liberation and says that

In the last instance we will have an authentic theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves can freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society and in the heart of the people of God, when they themselves "account for the hope," which they bear, when they are the protagonists of their own liberation.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Welch, op. cit., p. 34.

⁵¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo, A Theology of Liberation, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1973, p. 307.

He goes on to express his belief that this theology of liberation is the start of a process that has just begun. Our small project is a part of that ongoing process.

A further critique comes from feminist theologians, who recognize how much has been learned from Latin American liberation theology and share the analysis that praxis must be the context of theology, but identify its failure to recognize the systemic oppression of women as fundamental to a theology that is liberative.⁵²

The people in the base communities of Latin America and feminist theologians of the Third World have opened our eyes in new ways to our own context. Living in a very secularized society in Quebec, where overt religious values have been rejected, it is more difficult to identify the religio-cultural factors that are still operative in our community.⁵³

⁵² The Mud Flower Collective, in their critique of Latin American liberation theology, speak of two points of serious disengagement, being: "the failure of nonfeminist liberation theologians to take sexism and heterosexism seriously as fundamental political and theological issues" and the tendency to "overlook the 'small places' of their lives as theological praxis." God's Fierce Whimsy - Christian Feminism and Theological Education, Pilgrim Press, New York, 1985, pp. 19 - 21.

It must also be noted that there is not one Latin American theology of liberation, but many currents, which arise out of a shared context but have significant differences in understanding with respect to methodology, ecclesiology and the relationship to scripture. Since this is not the topic of this thesis, these differences will not be discussed and instead, the specific works that have influenced our method and critical questions that our method must address, will be considered.

⁵³ Part I, pp. 45 - 48.

Although people continue to attend church for the traditional rites of passage (baptism, confirmation or first communion, marriage and death), the church has failed to support marginalized communities in their struggle for survival and dignity as an integral part of their faith and theology. Nevertheless, the belief in a God and the desire to find meaning in one's daily struggles, through their faith, remains. This is a void that must be addressed. The method of feminist liberative ethics in which we have engaged, offers new insights into the development of an indigenous liberation theology within our community, that is both a theology of protest and a theology based on the hope that comes through collective engagement in social transformation.

Erickson suggests that "to be feminist, a liberation theology and social theory transplanted to the United States [sic, Canada] will need to respect the authentic experiences of the poor. It must value the poor as the social agents they are, understanding their moral agency from their perspective."⁵⁴

I would add to this, that respecting the moral agency of the poor will require "hearing" their voices and a willingness to understand the context out of which they speak. It is mandatory that the subjects of theological/ethical reflection be engaged in all aspects of the process and claim control of the utilization of their work.

Sharon Welch adds another challenge to feminist

⁵⁴ Erickson, op. cit., p. 188.

liberation theology in her book Communities of Resistance and Solidarity - A Feminist Theology of Liberation⁵⁵. She states that a legitimate methodology and theology must be judged on whether it supports and encourages resistance and liberation.

The critical reflection by intellectuals on the symbolic expression and political action of those who are oppressed includes a recognition of the tension implied in theoretical work: it may be either useless or oppressive. The value.....is determined by the role that analysis plays in furthering resistance.⁵⁶

The question I would add to hers, is who is to make the assessment of whether this analysis leads to further resistance? This would require the intimate involvement of those engaged in resistance with intellectuals and vice versa, the concrete engagement of intellectuals in resistance. This will form an integral part of a methodology of feminist liberative ethics presented in this thesis.

There are divergent views of the place of scripture in feminist liberative theology. In respecting women's experience of oppression as the starting point and central focus of her theology, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza takes the position that "whether or not the oppressed are liberated is the ultimate norm by which the Scriptures are judged."⁵⁷ This

⁵⁵ Welch, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

⁵⁷ Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Beacon Press, Boston, 1984, p. 31. Her scholarship in feminist biblical interpretation offers new insights into methods of approaching the scripture, through maintaining an important hermeneutical

liberative approach to biblical reflection is the method employed by the Worship Group and is a principle of the proposed methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

Mujerista Theology⁵⁸ arises out of the experience of Hispanic women in the United States and the book Hispanic Women - Prophetic Voice in the Church⁵⁹, presents a method that has been employed to give voice to a "remnant" community that has been silenced. Verbatim stories of women, who participated in dialogue week-ends and meetings, give voice to the theology and life experience that has shaped them. The method used to articulate the Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology (which later came to be known as Mujerista Theology), includes dialogue, story-telling, analysis, liturgy and strategizing. This is a very fruitful process that gives one much insight into the lives and expressions of faith of the

suspicion of the construction and effects such texts can have on women. She suggests that "the criterion used to evaluate biblical texts is whether or not the text serves to liberate women... The locus or place of divine revelation and grace is... the ekklesia of women and the lives of women who live the 'option for our women selves'" and the goal is "women's religious self-affirmation, power, and the liberation from all patriarchal alienation, marginalization, and oppression."
(p. 26)

⁵⁸ "Mujerista theology is a *mestizaje* (hybrid) born of the intersection of feminism, Hispanic culture, and the struggle for liberation", as defined by Isasi-Diaz in the article "The Bible and *Mujerista* Theology", found in the anthology, Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks, & Engel, Mary Potter, Editors, Life Every Voice - Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1990, p. 261.

⁵⁹ Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria and Tarango, Yolanda, Hispanic Women - Prophetic Voice in the Church, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988.

participants.⁶⁰

However, although there is a commitment to being accountable to the women through sharing the material that was written about them, the various groups did not interrelate, nor did they seem to have had a significant role in the formulation of the Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology. Although the graphic illustration of the spiral nature of action/reflection⁶¹ that was fundamental in their method, was employed in the process of the questions posed in the telling of an individual's story, there is no account of the women's engagement in collectively analysing their experience as Hispanic women from these stories. The method of feminist liberative ethics that we have employed, attempts to address this problem through the collective's involvement in all stages of discussion and writing.

(iii) Feminist Theory

The anthology, Women and Values - Readings in Recent

⁶⁰ The respect for accountability to the women is a part of the methodology and the recorder/writer/enabler "is accountable to the community for saying what the community has said... and accountable to the community for making what the community has said understandable to the other communities of struggle and even to the dominant group in order to challenge it." Ibid., p. 107. It is perhaps this multi-purpose goal of the writing that has resulted in such a noticeable difference between the language of the story-tellers and synthesis of their meaning in the theological analysis and formulation of the Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 97.

Feminist Philosophy⁶², brings together the voices of feminist theorists of many persuasions, who have in common a critical approach to traditional ethics. In the complex history of feminist thought, there has been a movement from the first wave of feminism in the nineteenth century which gave rise to the suffrage movement, to the second wave of feminism⁶³ which has given rise to a number of different types of feminism⁶⁴. From my own stance as a socialist feminist, it will be most helpful to consider the work of Nancy Hartsock in her article, Feminist Theory and the Development of Revolutionary Strategy⁶⁵, to discern the questions and challenges her theory poses to a method of feminist liberative ethics.

Hartsock declares that an examination of the experience of our everyday lives and "the integration of personal and political change"⁶⁶ must be the basis for the creation of

⁶² Pearsall, Marilyn, Women and Values - Readings in Recent Feminist Philosophy, Wadsworth Publishing, California, 1986.

⁶³ Ibid., This began with the appearance of Simone de Beauvoir's classic text, The Second Sex, in 1949. Pearsall sees this as a watershed in feminist thought, providing a dramatic shift from first-wave feminism, in taking the position that "not only must women be free to choose not to be the second sex, but they must choose the act of freedom: They must choose to liberate themselves." (p. xii)

⁶⁴ See footnote #1., p.1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 8 - 18.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 10. This understanding is similar to the position of most feminists that "the personal is political". However, Hartsock advocates that this awareness must lead to an opposition to the capitalist concept of the individual and the collective engagement in transforming the social relations

feminist revolutionary theory. She suggests that there are three factors of particular importance, that can make a method of feminism, rooted in daily life, a force for revolution⁶⁷:

- (1) the focus on everyday life and experience makes action a necessity, not a moral choice or an option...
- (2) The nature of our understanding of theory is altered and theory is brought into an integral and everyday relation with practice.
- (3) Theory leads directly to a transformation of social relations both in consciousness and in reality because of its close connection to real needs.⁶⁸

These factors act as guidelines in developing a methodology of feminist liberative ethics and will be used in the final chapter to evaluate the effectiveness of the method employed in meeting these criteria.

The significance of class analysis in developing feminist theory is often ignored or not understood as a fundamental factor that must be a part of a feminist critique of existing values. In raising questions about class, Hartsock writes that

class is a complex of relations, one in which

that define us. She states that "to change oneself... is to change social institutions... As Marx said: [in The Poverty of Philosophy] 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.' (p. 11.)

⁶⁷ Hartsock's use of the term "revolution" arises from her conviction that "we can only transform ourselves by struggling to transform the social relations which define us: changing selves and changed social institutions are simply two aspects of the same process". (p. 11)

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

knowledge or know-how⁶⁹ is at a premium, and second, at a deeper level, that what is involved in the daily reality of class oppression is the concrete working out of the division between mental and manual labor⁷⁰.

Problems such as lack of confidence and verbal ability surface repeatedly in the discussions of women of our community and their expectation or definition of "work", derives from a working-class perception.

The further question that our method must respond to, is whether the perception of class differences that is so evident in the book, will lead to building new understandings within feminist communities and a determination to listen to these voices, or will be more successful in building bridges with other communities that work for change out of necessity.

(iv) Sociology

In a critique of "established" sociology that claims objectivity in its analysis of society, social relations and people's lives⁷¹, Dorothy Smith offers ways in which such analysis must develop from the everyday lives and stories of

⁶⁹ Hartsock points out the need to further understand the ways in which class is a form of cultural domination. She states that "By noticing the real differences among women in terms of class - confidence, verbal ability, ease about money, sense of group identity - we are developing new questions about class." (p. 16)

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷¹ Smith, Dorothy E. The Everyday World as Problematic - A Feminist Sociology, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1987, p. 2.

women.⁷² Her work has had a strong influence on my own thought about social organization and she raises significant issues to be addressed in the method of feminist liberative ethics in which we have engaged.

Smith's chapter on feminist methodology⁷³, raises fundamental questions about the nature of research that arises out of women's everyday experience and the importance of the subjectivity of the researcher, who must be fully engaged in the community as subject.⁷⁴ This is a very important consideration of my method and will be discussed in Chapter

⁷² Smith states that "The sociology I learned and that organized the cognitive domain of my work at the university defined and interpreted the world of home and family, but there was no talking back. I have wanted to make an account and analysis of society and social relations that are not only about women but that make it possible for us to look at any or all aspects of a society from where we are actually located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of our lived worlds. Ibid., p. 8.

⁷³ Ibid., Chapter 3, "The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Methodology", pp. 105 - 145.

⁷⁴ Smith concludes this discussion on methodology with the observation that "Her [the sociological inquirer] own seeing arises in a context structured by the same system of social relations structuring the everyday worlds of those whose experience provides the problematic of her inquiry. Her only route to a faithful telling that does not privilege the perspectives arising in the sites of her sociological project and her participation in a sociological discourse is to commit herself to an inquiry that is ontologically faithful, faithful to the presence and activity of subjects and faithful to the actualities of the world that arises for her..." Ibid., pp. 142, 143.

This raises the question of how one ensures that one "is faithful"? Since we all carry with us our class conditioning, culture, preconditioned questions, worldview, etc., what method will assure that the process of interpretation has remained faithful?

Three which looks at the role of the ethicist in feminist liberative ethics.

I feel that Smith's commitment to total subjectivity on the part of the sociological researcher, leaves some unanswered questions. She describes extensively the significance of class in determining how we see, interpret and experience the world. Although a researcher might choose to bridge this gap by living and working within a community to be studied, as Smith suggests, I believe that her/his experience of the same configuration of social relations will differ greatly from those of the community. Therefore the problem of interpretation remains.

Smith emphasizes the accountability of the researcher "to those for whom we write" and points out that methodological strategies themselves

become merely academic if they are contained within the relations of academic discourse, even a feminist discourse. Methods such as those I have put forward must also be anchored in relations connecting them with women who do not participate in the relations of ruling and the discourses that interpenetrate them... giving voice to women's experience, opening up to women's gaze the forms and relations determining women's lives and enlarging women's powers and capacities to organize in struggle against the oppression of women.⁷⁵

The reading of this chapter reinforced my determination to have the collective writing "Hope is the Struggle" included as Part I of this thesis. The challenge remains to enable the continued involvement of the Women's Collective in discussing

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 225.

and critiquing Part II, the analysis of our work together, in spite of references and language that are not readily accessible. This is the ironic critique I would have of Dorothy Smith's work - that a sociological study based on "the everyday world as problematic", which is so progressive in its outlook, is written in language that would challenge the most educated in the field.

(v) Ethics

Economic justice is fundamental in socialist feminist ethics and the work of Beverly Harrison provides fertile ground for developing a methodology that respects this dimension. She expresses her dismay at the marginalization of economic theory in religious ethics in her article "The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics"⁷⁶ and outlines the key characteristics of radical political economy⁷⁷ that can be helpful to those involved in theological ethics.

She suggests that "a critical test of an economic theory is whether it enables an 'ah-hah' experience not unlike the

⁷⁶ Harrison, op. cit.

⁷⁷ These characteristics can be summarized as
(1) "the attention radical theory gives to concrete conflict and suffering"
(2) "its unequivocal methodological requirement that the political economy be understood as sociohistorical reality that is, in principle, transformable"
(3) "to hold itself answerable to and to accept responsibility for concretely illuminating the experiences of everyday life"
(4) "all economic activity is intrinsically and directly related to the overall cultural and institutional matrix of human social life" Ibid., pp. 74 - 78.

moment of religious transcendence".⁷⁸ Whereas Harrison's language is difficult reading for the uninitiated in economic theory, the work of Marilyn Waring⁷⁹ provides an analysis that passes this critical test of speaking directly to experience, as we found in the Women's Collective. The significance of her writing, in the development of the women's capacity to engage in economic analysis, will be discussed later.

Harrison has summarized and addressed what she considers to be the key elements of a liberation social ethics methodology⁸⁰. These stages, not to be taken sequentially, are 1) the entry point of conscientization, 2) historical socioethical analysis, 3) careful examination of the roots and ongoing dynamics of oppression or subjugation, 4) clarification of our solidarities and loyalties, 5) explicit attention paid to clarifying a movement's options for action, 6) continuous examination of strategic options in light of the moral norms espoused in and intrinsic to the liberation process itself, 7) the hermeneutic of liberation as a critique of the internal history of Christianity itself and 8) the reconstructive phase of *annunciation* and *celebration*.⁸¹ These key elements will be very useful in framing the final

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

⁷⁹ Waring, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Harrison, op. cit., p. 302.

⁸¹ "Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation - A Feminist Perspective", Ibid., pp. 249 - 261

analysis and evaluation of my proposed methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

The article, "Appropriation and Reciprocity in the doing of Feminist and Womanist Ethics", by Emilie Townes, is very helpful in considering the strengths and pitfalls that face feminist ethicists. She cautions against "rushing into the now-filled-silences of the voices that were long unheard (but not unspoken)", using their experiences as the base of an ethical analysis that precludes their participation and suggests that;

An internal rigorous hermeneutic of suspicion must be at work as feminists and womanists do the work of ethics.....The particularity of women's lives is the essence of who they are and the substance of their communities. This is `their stuff` and women approaching their material as if it can be taken carte blanche and interpreted through other lenses of experience with no question or attempt to understand the culture it comes from and the lives it represents, does violence not only to that culture, but wreaks havoc on measured attempts at scholarship that seek to be truly liberatory ethics.⁸²

These important warnings must be taken a step further, acknowledging the difficulty in understanding any culture from outside, and seeking methods in liberative ethics that will include "the lives it represents" in the process of interpretation. Will this require developing either new language that is understandable to non-professionals, or

⁸² Townes, Emilie, "Appropriation and Reciprocity in the doing of Feminist and Womanist Ethics"; Anal of the Society of Christian Ethics, 1993, p. 188.

educational methods and tools of analysis for training lay people in ethics - or both? This question must be addressed if we are to bridge the chasm that presently exists.

I am very indebted to the work of Janet Silman⁸³ in developing a method of liberative ethics through her work with native women. She states that "a liberative methodology can be defined as the process by which people analyze and transform their social world... which encompasses both reflective discernment and strategies of action".⁸⁴ She suggests that it is the fruits of a methodology that will verify whether it is truly liberative and this question will be asked in a final evaluation of the effectiveness of the my method.

It has been very helpful to me to study Silman's method and learn from her experience. Through her engagement with the Tobique women in their struggle to confront the discriminatory consequences against women within the Indian Act, Silman collaborated with the women to write a book "which would be a vehicle of empowerment for aboriginal women and of consciousness-raising for white people."⁸⁵ She functioned as interviewer, editor and project co-ordinator and the women of the community decided who should be interviewed. They did not

⁸³ Silman, op. cit.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

⁸⁵ Silman, Janet, Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out, Women's Press, Toronto, 1986.

wish to involved in the writing, but were consulted to approve their own final story that appeared in the book. These stories stand as a very powerful witness of their history and collective struggle.

This book and the subsequent thesis, whose overall objective was "to demonstrate the value of praxis as a methodology for ethics"⁸⁶, comes closest to the method and some of the objectives of my work. I will not review her thesis as such, but will discuss the convergence and significant differences in our method.

Some of the methodological similarities are the grounding of the method in the concrete experiences of women's oppression; the ethicist's engagement in the struggle of a marginalized group; the use of story-telling as a vehicle to recall history and build on the power of the experience of social transformation; collective decision-making on direction of book; accountability to the group for production and use of book; "trust as the relational foundation of the book... and the relational bedrock of methodology"⁸⁷.

The significant differences in the method we employed, that I feel bring new insight for a methodology of feminist liberative ethics, are as follows: the participation of the collective in the writing and the significance of regularly seeing in print what they had said at a previous session;

⁸⁶ Silman, A Women's View From Within, p. 79.

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 69, 70.

analysis by the women themselves of the method in which they were engaged as a source of transformation; my involvement as a participant in the Women's Collective; the naming of "hope" as the core of their work and the search to understand its meaning and presence, as integral to the method; reading feminist literature as another dimension of the process of transformation; relationship with another culture as a significant means of understanding one's own struggle.

3. The book "Hope is the Struggle" - A method of feminist liberative ethics

The book is the primary resource that illustrates the method in which we engaged in order to articulate our experiences, thoughts and analysis. In addition, material from the transcripts of all our discussions will be used to explore the effects of such a method and the places of transformation that occurred. Although we have all been engaged for many years in actions, theological reflection, evaluation and developing strategies through our specific engagements, the writing of the book enabled us to step back from our experience and challenged us to assess the value of our work . The women in the collective assumed the task of voicing their experience and accepting responsibility for ethical reflection on their engagement. The book offered the means for them to express themselves as moral agents in a definitive and risking way.

How the writing of the book has affected the women has been touched on in the book itself⁸⁸ and will be discussed further in the thesis in Chapter Four, "Hope as Integral to the Methodology"

The writing of the book "Hope in the Struggle" is an integral part of this method of feminist liberative ethics, in that it has provided the means for those in the struggle to raise the ethical problems facing their particular community, to identify the values that support the ongoing struggle against oppression, to discover that articulation itself can be a source of new energy for engagement and to take on the responsibility of sharing their theological ethical reflections with others.

The ongoing involvement of the Women's Collective in reading this thesis as it is produced, is another step in this method. I am accountable to the university for my thesis submission, using language appropriate to this milieu, and my training as a theologian and ethicist prepares me to share what we have learned with academic colleagues. However this must not preclude the ongoing participation of the Women's Collective in this work. The academic articles that we read together, were very significant in our discussions and were a step towards overcoming language/class barriers. I would hope that this would also be the case with an academic reflection on their own work.

⁸⁸ Part I, pp. 219 - 221.

4. Components of a Method of Feminist Liberative Ethics

In this study, method will be a primary focus in discerning how the writing of the book "Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action" offers new principles in a methodology of feminist liberative ethics. The contingent nature of this study does not imply that it is not possible to propose guidelines and principles that will be relevant to other communities. However, since the premise of feminist liberative ethics is the reflection of engaged communities on the understanding of their oppression and that which will enable them to continue in the struggle, further applications of the method must bear the distinctive stamp of other contexts.

The following are some of the challenges and questions that arise from the broad field of disciplines that comprise feminist liberative ethics and will inform the development of a methodology.

* The starting point of a method of liberative ethics is engagement in the struggle against concrete experiences of injustice and oppression

* A method of feminist liberative ethics must involve those who are subjects in the research in all stages of discussion, interpretation, ethical/theological reflection, analysis and writing, and this experience must shape the methodology.

* A methodology and theology of feminist liberative ethics must be judged on whether it supports and encourages

resistance and liberation. This evaluation cannot be done by intellectuals alone, but requires the involvement of those directly engaged in the resistance.

* A methodology of feminist liberative ethics must lead to a transformation of social relations both in consciousness and in reality.

* The presence of hope and its discernment in the process of social and personal transformation is an integral principle of a methodology of liberative ethics.

* Seeing one's words in print and the writing of a book are transformative principles of a liberative methodology

* Risk and trust are integral factors in this methodology

* Awareness of issues of exploitation and the danger of appropriation must be considered in a theory of liberative ethics

* A question to be addressed: Will the awareness of class issues in the book, lead to new understandings within feminist communities and openness to listen to these voices, or will it be more effective in building bridges with other marginalized communities?

* Whether or not the oppressed are liberated is the ultimate norm by which the Scriptures are judged in a liberative theology.

* The accountability of the academia to those who engage in ethical reflection from their life experience requires the utilization of language that is understandable to non-

professionals and/or educational methods and tools of analysis for training lay people in ethics

* Reading feminist literature is a liberative step in the process of transformation.

* Encounter with another culture is a significant step in understanding one's own struggle and an important part of a liberation process.

The method of feminist liberative ethics in which we have engaged, offers new insights into the development of an indigenous liberation theology within our community, that is both a theology of protest and a theology based on the hope that comes through the collective engagement in social transformation. This experience will be presented in the light of the questions or criteria arising from the literature, to offer new insights into a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

CHAPTER TWO

A Method of Liberative Ethics

This method of liberative ethics evolved through the process of collective discussion and five women's reflections on their lives and experience of engagement in the work for social change within their community. It arises out of the conviction that their own understanding of the source of hope or energy that undergirds their tenacious commitment to better the conditions in our working-class district, is not only a story that must be told, but a story that, in the telling, will itself be regenerative.

1. Engagement, as the Starting Point

The Context: This study arises out of a history of women's engagement for social change in an inner city impoverished community. Point St. Charles has had a long history of militancy and its working class people have fought to preserve the community against encroaching gentrification and to maintain its community organizations that have developed to fight for access to education, health care, economic development and affordable housing.⁸⁹ I have worked in this community of Point St. Charles for the past fourteen years and am continually struck by the courage, strength and wisdom of

⁸⁹ See description of this community in Part I, Chapter 2; "Hope is Community", pp. 35 - 63.

its people. They are the experts on poverty, survival and taking risks. Their understanding comes out of their lived experience, their need to analyze and confront the forces that work against them and to find the sources of power within the community that can be mobilized.

The base of the community organizing that led to the collective writing of the book "Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action", is St. Columba House an Outreach Ministry of the United Church of Canada. The goal⁹⁰ of our centre has been to provide support and resources for people in the community as we work together to change the oppressive conditions of poverty and seek signs of hope, through responding to expressed needs of the community (e.g. the Point Adult Centre for Education), initiating programs to increase awareness and develop critical analysis (e.g. the Community Lunch Program and the Women's Discussion Group), engaging in socio-economic analysis with the community coalition,

⁹⁰ St. Columba House 1994 Annual Report, Mission Statement: "Our mission is to be a concrete presence of the Church in Point St. Charles, an underprivileged area of Montreal, and to be engaged with people of the community who are victims of poverty and systems of injustice. Through our direct involvement, embedded in the life of the community, we work to empower the people as they identify their goals and visions for social change, to seek ways to change their conditions through education, community organizing and advocacy, to respond to their immediate needs where possible, and to accompany them in their struggle to find hope and the presence of God in their lives. In the broader church, we work with congregations to interpret our common mission as we respond to and learn from the marginalized in our midst."

encouraging the participation of citizens in voicing their concerns publicly and starting community development projects (e.g. the Point At Work).

A very significant aspect of this engagement has been the development of the weekly Worship Group, through which the participants have grown in their capacity to engage in biblical reflection that arises out of their experience, bringing new hope, insight and energy for the struggle. As director of this centre, I have been engaged in particular in the development of women's groups that address the needs for education, employment, feminist analysis, mutual support and worship that is integrated with their daily struggles.

This engagement has been the fertile soil in which I have been taught by the community, challenged to question my presuppositions and seen the power of hope that persists in the darkest times. This engagement has shown me that people in this community have exceptional skills in cutting to the heart of the matter, in sensing the vital core of a problem and "knowing" what is life-giving - what Beverly Harrison would call the "epistemological privilege" of the poor.⁹¹

The awareness of the gifts, strengths and wisdom this community has to offer in ethical and theological reflection, prompted me to go the next step in encouraging a group of women to engage intentionally in ethical reflection from their context. Their experience has been both the starting point

⁹¹ Harrison, op. cit., p. 246.

and the end of the reflection, as we sought collectively to understand what produces the sought-after change, why people become engaged, how one finds energy and hope to continue in the struggle.

Four women, who are involved in the Point Adult Centre for Education, the Women's Discussion Group, the Point At Work women's upholstery co-operative and the Worship Group, were invited to participate in a collective writing about their engagement in the community. Their work is concrete and goal-oriented, but there has been an increasing interest over the years in understanding and articulating the means by which changes and empowerment have come about.

Although there are many others whose contributions and insights are so important in our community work, these four women offer the special gifts of long-term engagement in tough struggles and the desire to make the connections between their personal lives, faith dimension, systemic injustice and community actions. I also felt that through our various experiences together, there was the basis of trust that would enable us really to engage each other in dialogue about sensitive issues. All of us have families and face the challenge of combining our important roles as mothers, breadwinners, workers, activists and volunteers. Although we come from different religious backgrounds, we share a commitment to God's call to work for justice and an awareness of the presence of God in the midst of our struggles.

As it became known in the community that we were writing a book, one of the women reported an upsetting conversation with a neighbour who asked, "Who do you think your are? What right do five women have to write on behalf of our whole community?" As we talked together, we clarified that on the one hand, we were writing an account from the perspective of five women, but on the other hand, recognizing how we were shaped by the community and the struggles in which we were engaged, we hoped to voice as well some of the collective concerns and visions of our community.⁹²

Women have been selected to participate in this project for three reasons. First, in our community as in many others, it is primarily women who are involved in people's movements and organizations to work for social change. Second, women are the most seriously affected by poverty and in our

⁹² Claudia Salazar discusses this private/public dichotomy in her article "A Third World Woman's Text: Between the politics of Criticism and Cultural Politics" (Gluck Sherna Berger; Patai, Daphne, editors, Women's Words - The Feminist Practice of Oral History, Routledge, New York, 1991, pp. 93 - 104). She points out that in the well-known autobiography I, Rigoberta Menchu, the statement "I'd like to stress that it's not my life, it's also the testimony of my people", is an expression of shared experience and consciousness. "Acknowledging the differences between individuals in the community, she sees herself simply as part of that community....Rigoberta connects the personal - i.e., the cultural, the material-historical, the linguistic-conceptual network which forms a person or social identity - to the larger context of social relations." (p. 94, 95) The women engaged in the writing of "Hope is the Struggle" would never have agreed to write a story of their personal lives, but through their own lived experience in our community, were willing to grapple with larger questions of meaning, consciousness-raising and hope through collective struggle.

community they bear the double burden of oppression on the basis of gender and class. Third, a feminist perspective undergirds this study in the search to explore the relationship of gender to socio-economic conditions and the development of a feminist method of liberative ethics.

Our first meeting together was an exploration of the women's interest in sharing and writing about their experience. Although they all were intrigued with the idea of discussing the reasons why they were engaged in their work and how they were supported in this over the years, there was great scepticism about the value of their own reflections for others. The idea of writing a book seemed very unrealistic and far-fetched. I proposed that we work towards this goal and that we would develop how we would do this as we went along.

It was very important that I clarify my own interests in producing a book. I explained that I felt that they could offer new insights to others engaged in building more just communities and bring new understandings of faith through their unique contribution to biblical reflection out of the context of an impoverished community. I also discussed my conviction that through the process of reflection on their experience, they would find new understanding or encouragement for their own work, while at the same time exploring creative ways for working-class people to be directly involved in ethical reflection.

It was very important to be clear at the outset that the first objective was to write a book collectively for our own purposes and that subsequently, I would use our book in the writing of a thesis that explored our method and learning. "Who is the book for?" was a significant question that was raised at our first working session. After looking at various possibilities, Myrna suggested; "Let's work on the assumption that its just for ourselves and then when we're done, we can discuss after what we want to do with it."⁹³ However, after further discussion, we agreed that it would be important to publish the book so that it could be shared in our community, with other grassroots groups and church members.

Another important initial clarification was what my role would be. The women were very clear that I was to be a participant with them and the book would be the collective expression of the five of us. This was not always easy and led to further discussion at a later stage when we were working on the initial draft of the book.

So my role has been as a participant in this process of collective reflection on our experience. A significant part of my task was to help the group recognize their own capacity to engage in ethical reflection and to articulate in their own words, the values and principles that undergird their engagement. This is a goal of a methodology of liberative ethics that seeks to encourage and identify the moral agency

⁹³ Transcript of Jan. 20, 1994 session

of those in the struggle - in reflection as well as action.

In their work with working-class women and men, Olsen and Shopes have emphasized the importance of a researcher's [or ethicist's] engagement with a community, if the end result is to further the goals of the community.

Only by being citizen-scholar-activists rooted in a community over an extended period of time do we have the opportunity to develop the networks, the political insights, and the credibility that may enable our research to be useful in a process of social change. By doing work where we have personal commitments, our academic contributions are more likely to come out of a personal, creative, politically engaged self, one that has a social - and not simply academic -purpose.⁹⁴

I feel that they have raised important fundamental questions, that I have sought to address through my work, about usurping others' experience and the heightened awareness that is necessary to engage such a community in reflection that will be valuable and beneficial to their own ongoing engagement.

I have learned from and valued the work of Janet Silman with Tobique women and share her belief that "The methodological starting place for a liberative ethic is the struggle against concrete experience of injustice and oppression."⁹⁵ She describes how the first four months of her

⁹⁴ Karen Olson & Linda Shopes, "Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges: Doing Oral History among Working-Class Women and Men", in Gluck Sherna Berger; Patai, Daphne, editors, Women's Words - The Feminist Practice of Oral History, Routledge, New York, 1991, p. 201.

⁹⁵ Silman, op. cit., p. 16.

intensive work with the Tobique women were spent in meetings, accompanying them on lobbying encounters and just being with the community.⁹⁶ Although she experienced some frustration at the slow beginnings of their project, she recognized how essential it was for her to become engaged with them, to understand their struggle from the inside and to gain their trust.

Concrete engagement with those in the struggle against oppressive systems is the mandatory first step in the role of the ethicist and with that goes the commitment that this engagement will remain the primary focus of ethical reflection.

2. Method - a Circular Process

The ethicist must bring to an engagement in liberative ethics a clear sense of her (or his) methodological approach and the theological, sociological and ethical convictions on which it is based.⁹⁷ At the same time, a central axis of this methodology is the openness to discover, within an engaged community, the source of that which is liberative in a people's struggle and this could challenge or question both the ethicist's underlying assumptions and methodology.

Mutual learning and analysis are fundamental in a method of liberative ethics. From the very beginning, the women

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 16 - 20.

⁹⁷ See discussion on pp. 224 -226, Part II.

showed their strong interest and capacity to engage in ethical/theological reflection and their willingness to challenge me. We developed a method of working together that allowed for great flexibility in our discussions, but also engaged us in constant rethinking or critique of earlier comments.

We met approximately every two weeks over the period of two years. We began with supper together and in this way were able to reconnect informally. Each session was recorded and I typed transcripts that were distributed to everyone before the next meeting. This enabled us to read over what had been said and highlight comments we had made that we might want to change or discuss further. After a topic had been thoroughly discussed, I produced a write-up for further discussion, that included both direct dialogue from the transcripts and a general synthesis of our viewpoints.

An example of this process are the individual stories that are found in Chapter One of the book.⁹⁸ These were constructed by bringing together different parts of each women's story as it evolved during our sessions. But of course, these sporadic comments were not the whole story and sometimes contained very personal reflections that were not left in the final version. We worked both on our own story and on each other's, in a very important process of reflecting on the meaning of our stories for ourselves and what they

⁹⁸ Part I, pp. 20 - 33.

might say to readers.

Seeing their own words in writing had a very profound impact on the women and they shared how their day to day work was being affected by this collective writing. They also experienced times that left them deeply troubled as they grappled with their own stories, the despair in our community, and the very difficult ethical choices that confront them.

Topics to be discussed or pursued further, came out of the transcripts of prior sessions. We began to develop a list of subjects we wished to include in our book, but sometimes found that our most valuable discussions arose unexpectedly. The flexibility to follow our interest and not always a set plan, proved to be very important.

After six months together, we engaged the community groups that the women worked with (the Point Adult Centre for Education, the Women's Discussion Group, the Point At Work and the Worship Group), in reflecting on their involvement. We explained the process we were using to write our book and committed ourselves to request permission from each group for the final material that we would use. Discussions were initiated through questions concerning the objectives of the organization or project, their expectations, the particular needs they hoped to meet, their successes, frustrations and failures, their impact on the community and the changes they have observed in themselves or the group through their actions.

The Women's Book Collective discussed the transcripts from these sessions and identified the most significant information to be incorporated in the write-up, which I prepared. This article was then shared with all the participants in the organization or project, and any comments, corrections or suggestions were incorporated in the final writing. This was an opportunity to bring more people into the process and was a very enriching experience that engaged us in considering again, not only what accurately described a group's function, but also what could or should be said publicly. This process led to some important changes to initial write-ups that were circulated and had some significant ongoing effects within the participant organizations or projects.⁹⁹

As the book began to take shape, we realized the need to have a more intensive time of work together. The decision to devote a week-end to work together at my cottage, required yet a further commitment on the part of women who were already carrying very heavy loads at home and at work. However, this time away helped us to really advance the work and the overall structure of the book. This extended period together also provided the opportunity to engage in some very supportive personal reflections and sharing. There must always be times for fun and joy in the struggle!

⁹⁹ See significance of methodology as means of empowerment, Part II, pp. 365 - 367.

As we approached the end of our writing, we intentionally engaged in discussion about the effect producing the book had on each of us personally. The extent to which this process was in itself liberative will be discussed in the following chapters on "Hope as Integral to the Methodology" and "The Fruits of a Methodology of Liberative Ethics".

Throughout our work together, there was the underlying uneasiness and fear of how both our community and our families would respond to the book. There was a mutual agreement that none of the book would be shown to anyone prior to its publication, except for specific requests to verify someone's reaction that was named in the book. Apart from the sections that were shared with groups that had been involved in the reflection, only one woman felt the need to talk to her partner about an incident in which he was named.

3. Story-telling

Telling our stories was the entry point to engagement in theological and ethical reflection. The women's experience is shared through recounting stories that hold within them the complexity of the feelings, suffering, rejection, hopes and meaning of their lives. In our initial session we spoke of our reasons for writing a book together and began to discuss the source of the hope that was at the core of all our work. As the women grappled for the words to express what this word "hope" meant to them, they turned to the stories of their

experience in community groups.¹⁰⁰

As they spoke later of their experience growing up in an impoverished community, stories were recounted that spoke of the hard struggle to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth. These stories led to further discussions about the effects of poverty on children, the judgemental attitudes that deeply affect future decisions about our own potential and the scars from hurtful experiences that remain with us and have their effect throughout our lives.¹⁰¹

Story-telling has been a fundamental ingredient in the work with the Women's Discussion Group. Their capacity to support one another, to dare to reject the limitations that have been put on them and to change situations that are destructive, has come from sharing their stories. In the telling of the story, a woman has begun to listen to her own

¹⁰⁰ An example of this is Elizabeth's reference to her work with P.A.C.E., in which she said; "Even when you get hope, it's like it is moving away! (this was met with a chorus of agreement) It's like P.A.C.E., for instance. We finally have the centre established and its running quite smoothly, but I want more. I'm sure it could be better. It's hope, but it's also like you're hoping you can get a little more out of it and give more to the people. The needs are so great and you know you'll never fulfil all the needs. But it is not greed, it is hope." Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 1, January 20, 1994.

¹⁰¹ During our discussion on poverty and the search for a word that did not rob people of their dignity, Myrna thought back to her own hard experience of raising five children as a single parent on welfare and said; "I think it stayed with me. I'll never forget when someone brought me a food basket and said, 'Oh look at those kids, how clean they are!'. What did they think they were going to see?" Part I, p. 54.

voice. When others listen to the story and encourage the teller to explain further or consider the options that are open to her for future action, the story can become the vehicle of transformation.¹⁰² Some of these stories have become a part of the collective memory of such groups and carry a power to elicit in others the belief in the power to bring about changes.¹⁰³

Such stories are the heart of the Worship Group's theological reflections, that approach the biblical story from the experience of the underside. The story of Hagar is seen as the struggle of the most powerless of women, to take charge of her life and to assure a promising future for her child. We have made connections to Hagar's experience through our own stories of seeking a voice and resisting domination, while recognizing how then, as now, women's choices are limited by their socio-economic conditions. The parable of the widow who

¹⁰² A very simple example of this was the response to Joan's supposedly funny stories about being unable to cook. "It was a standing joke and everyone laughed about it. But then after awhile, the group started to take her on and help her deal with it... The difference came when people really took her seriously... And she went on from there to deal with a lot of other problems." (Part I, p. 192)

¹⁰³ The story of Joan learning to cook is remembered as the beginning of her taking more responsibility for decisions in her family, eventually leaving a destructive marriage and finally entering into a new relationship that has brought her and her children, stability and happiness.

stood up against the unjust judge¹⁰⁴ is both the reliving of the feeling of humiliation in the face of those who have power, such as welfare agents, and the recounting of their own stories of struggle¹⁰⁵.

Story-telling has long been valued, particularly by women, to make connections between our life and experience and another's, and to search for the wisdom and strength that lie within the story that will carry us forward. Janet Silman in the Introduction to the book Enough is Enough - Aboriginal Women Speak Out, explains that the story is told by the women and that,

telling their story is worth the risks involved - not to settle any old scores, but to show people what life is like for Indian women in Canada, and to demonstrate how a group of women can work together to create a better future for themselves and their children.¹⁰⁶

The stories we have told and heard are also a part of the commitment of people in our community to create a better future for themselves and their children. I have seen the power of story-telling, as the authority out of which understanding and truths will arise.

¹⁰⁴ Luke 18: 1 - 5.

¹⁰⁵ This parable has been related to many stories of struggles in the community, such as P.A.C.E. (Part I, pp. 61, 62), the insistence of the Women Against Contamination committee for testing of their children (Part I, pp. 43, 45) and the community's mobilization to maintain control of their C.L.S.C. (Part I, p. 29).

¹⁰⁶ Silman, Janet, Enough is Enough - Aboriginal women Speak Out, Women's Press, Toronto, 1987, p. 15.

4. Theological Reflection

A small Biblical worship/reflection group has met weekly over the past fourteen years to share our faith and our concerns. We have seen our engagement in the community through new eyes and seek to understand what brings hope or energy in the struggle. The starting point of our worship is the concerns of our community, the projects we are involved in, the pressures that we are facing and the light that breaks through from time to time. We use a scripture reading¹⁰⁷ to focus our questions and push us to deeper understandings of both our task and God's participation with us. Such discussions have often led to insights and interpretations that challenge traditional commentaries.¹⁰⁸ They have also led to new understandings of what changes must be made in our own centre to be a more just, caring community.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Over the years, the group has chosen to study the parables, a complete gospel or to follow the lectionary readings.

¹⁰⁸ An example of this is the interpretation of the Parable of the Gold Coins, Luke 19: 11 - 27, discussed in the final chapter of the book. (Part I, pp. 213 - 221)

¹⁰⁹ An example that illustrates a small change was in response to our discussion of who is the least among us, from Luke 9: 48, which reads, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among all of you is the greatest". As we talked about our centre, it was felt that the people who came to the Clothing Room were "the least", in the sense of power and the unwelcoming basement corridor in which they had to wait. The morning after our discussion, the women of the P.A.W. upholstery co-operative had refinished a plain wooden bench in the hallway with attractive, padded upholstery. This was a step that came from new insight into what the call to respect the least in our midst, meant in concrete terms.

The making of the banner that hangs in our Main Hall was a first step in response to the challenge to share and involve others in making their faith address the real questions that they are posing. The participation of various groups in symbolically representing the goals and aspirations of their work, created the soil for a new level of theological reflection.¹¹⁰ The creation of the banner was in itself an epistemological shift and theological turning point for the Worship Group.

As they have developed their capacity to engage in liberative theological reflection, the group has been invited to give leadership to theological students and church groups on this process. Such requests have encouraged a further analysis to clarify just how we function, what new insights might be shared with others outside the community and our understanding of experience as the basis of authority from which we approach scripture. In this way, we have entered into discussion of the methodology of liberative feminist theology.

An article I wrote in 1990, entitled "Moving from Margin to Centre" is an expression of my developing Christology that arises from the interconnection of the concrete engagements in our community with the weekly biblical reflections of the

¹¹⁰ The stories represented in the banner and the biblical connections that have developed, are related in Part I, pp. 109-117.

Worship Group.¹¹¹ The members of the Worship Group felt it reflected their experience and this written account has been very helpful in their preparation for church workshops on feminist liberative methods of reading the Bible. It has also been a springboard that was useful in illustrating the interconnections between our reflections and engagements, and provided a first step in preparing the ground for our collective writing.

This process has engaged us in a hermeneutical circle¹¹², with the starting point the concrete experience of

¹¹¹ This article is the basis for Part I, Chapter Four, "HOPE - Shifting from Margin to Centre", which has been revised and expanded by the writing collective.

¹¹² The "hermeneutical circle", expanded from Bultmann's concept, forms the basis of Juan Luis Segundo's methodology and is defined as "the continuing change in our interpretation of the bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present day reality, both individual and societal". He describes four decisive factors or steps in this circle. "Firstly, there is our way of experiencing reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion. Secondly there is the application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. Thirdly there comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion.....Fourthly, we have our new hermeneutic, that is our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e., Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal." (Segundo, Juan Luis, The Liberation of Theology, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1988 edition, p. 8, 9)

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza brings to this methodology a feminist critique that sees scripture as "prototype" rather than "archetype" (Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, In Memory of Her - A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, Crossroad, New York, 1983, p.33 ff.) and describes the hermeneutical circle in the following way. "Understanding takes place in a circular movement: Interpretation and answer are to some extent determined by the question, which in turn is confirmed, extended, or corrected by the text. A new question then grows out of this understanding, so that the

engagement, followed by analysis and reflection on the engagement, incorporating and reflecting further through worship and biblical study, returning to the locus of engagement for further reflection, then beginning the circle again. Of course, the direction is never this ordered, but is more like the intersection of ever-increasing spirals that lead to new understandings and further questions.

The significance of this experience as a process of transformation will be further discussed in the following chapters on "Hope as Integral to the Methodology" and "The Fruits of a Method of Liberative Ethics".

5. Making Connections from the Outside

The Written Word

As we delved deeper into discussions on work, hope, the economy, values and women's concerns, I suggested that we might be helped by reading outside sources. Although the group readily agreed to do this, there was some concern that the language of such literature might not be easy for them. It is a very instructive exercise to search for appropriate texts on these subjects that, not only use accessible language, but also are not written from a middle class bias.

I did not succeed in meeting these criteria and with an

hermeneutical circle continues in a never-ending spiral." (Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, Bread Not Stone - The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Beacon Press, Boston, 1984, p. 38)

initial apology that the articles may be hard going, we began by reading a chapter from "If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics" by Marilyn Waring¹¹³ and the article "Two Hands for the Clock - Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division of Labour in the Home" by Meg Luxton¹¹⁴. The women's response went beyond all my expectations. Their discussions are reported in Chapters 5 and 7 of "Hope in the Struggle"¹¹⁵ and the effect on them will be discussed further in this thesis in Chapters Four and Five.

The following methodological issues were raised for me through this discussion of outside material: concrete experience as a bridge across cultures or classes; the power the written word can have to those whose lives are centred on survival rather than on intellectual endeavours; the transformative nature of being engaged in ethical reflection; the significance of developing a liberative ethics that will enable the experience and critique from unheard voices to be heard. The following is an excerpt from my own reflections written following our first discussion of outside material.

This was an exceedingly exciting evening for me! I had hoped, but never dreamed it would be so stimulating and productive for the group to read

¹¹³ Waring, Marilyn, If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics, Harper, San Francisco, 1988.

¹¹⁴ Luxton, Meg, "Two Hands for the Clock - Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division of Labour in the Home", in Through the Kitchen Window - The Politics of Home and Family, Garamond Press, Toronto, 1990.

¹¹⁵ Part I, pp. 146 - 154 and pp.186 - 189.

other's work for their own reflection. I had a very hard time finding books that didn't use very difficult, technical, academic language and was quite surprised at how many writings I felt I had to exclude because of the level of language. However, these two articles seemed to speak so much to the experience and discussions we had as a group, that I decided to risk using them.

I was amazed to hear that they had found the articles so very interesting and quite exciting to read. A couple of the women said that they had sat down with a dictionary beside them to look up words they didn't know. What commitment! They also said that if they read things in context, they could understand, even if they didn't get all the words. The articles touched their own knowledge from experience and this made a great bridge.

I had thought the articles could provoke discussion that might carry us further in some areas, but I was not prepared to hear how significant the readings had been on a personal and concrete action level.

For Myrna, it was like a wonderful support of all we have struggled with over the years, to see it "written down". It was like a validation and an encouragement that we were on the right track. It was like these problems and struggles, seen in an even larger and more important sphere, become the call to further engagement.

For Elizabeth, it was like a revelation of her own home situation, to see the analysis of gendered division of labour. She had heard all this before, but reading it was very powerful for her. It pushed her to make some decisions in her home and to question why she had not done this before. It was really an "aha" experience for her.

The writings also validated our work in writing a book together. The women weren't too certain whether anyone would want to read what we wrote or how significant it might be, but reading other's analysis on some of the themes they have dealt with, gave them great encouragement to go on.

It was wonderful to see how immediately they grappled with the broader analysis of the economy. Although the language was difficult, their experience led them to recognize and understand very quickly what was being discussed. They could also see that they may have an edge, in some discussions, because they "live" the situation. It was truly empowering for the group to read these articles.

Out of my experience in engaging a group of

women in Biblical Reflection over the years, I did not doubt that there could be the same sort of delving and building understanding of broader concepts and analysis. However, after my initial discouragement about finding materials that were popular enough language to use, I have been amazed at how quickly the group has picked up new ways of reflecting or structuring their own knowledge through outside reading.

It was like tapping a well, a thirst for knowledge and further understanding, by bringing fresh water from outside.¹¹⁶

Other readings, from books such as "Monday Morality - Right and Wrong in Daily Life"¹¹⁷ by Wakin and "To Work and To Love - a theology of creation"¹¹⁸ by Soelle, were used to broaden our knowledge¹¹⁹ and their use will be discussed further in considering the effects on the women of their engagement in this process and in the evaluation of the method.

A Global Connection

Our visit to Mexico, where we met with women's groups, grassroots organizations, learned of the history of the Mexican people, visited development projects, talked and worshipped with Christian Base Communities, has been a very

¹¹⁶ My Reflections on Dialogue 9, June 28, 1994.

¹¹⁷ Wakin, Edward, Monday Morality - right and Wrong in Daily Life, Paulist Press, New York, 1980.

¹¹⁸ Soelle, Dorothee with Shirley A. Cloyes, To Work and To Love - a theology of creation, fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984.

¹¹⁹ See discussions in the book, Part I, pp. 28, 121 - 123.

important foundational experience for our group. This was the first in-depth exposure the women had to another culture and yet there was an intuitive profound connection across all the differences of language, culture and context. Spending two weeks together in which we engaged in discussions of the root causes of poverty, the economic system, the historical conditions that have produced the present situation in Mexico and meeting with people doing extraordinary community development work with so few resources, laid the groundwork for later reflections on our own community.

The presence of the theology students on this learning expedition provided the challenge to articulate what we experienced from our faith perspective and the recognition of how much our class context influenced what was perceived. Discussions and debates helped the women to identify the particularity of their community and the commonality with the Mexican workers. The chapter "HOPE from Global Neighbours" in our book¹²⁰ reflects on this experience.

6. Components of the Method

A method of liberative ethics, that was used in the writing of the book "Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action", raises a number of areas that require further analysis and critique. A summary of the significant components of this method follows.

¹²⁰ Part I, pp. 156 - 179.

(i) Engagement

Concrete engagement with those in the struggle against oppressive systems is mandatory for the ethicist and those that will participate in a process of liberative ethics. Such reflection must augment and aid the ongoing work of the community and their engagement will remain the primary focus of ethical reflection.

(ii) Collective nature of the method

A method that is liberative must respect the collective nature of the work for social change and strive to reinforce this commitment. Collective reflection and writing requires the encouragement of participants to assume as much control of the process as they are willing or able to accept. This demands a careful clarification of roles and responsibilities at each step. The role of the ethicist in working towards this goal is complex and in the following chapter, issues such as accountability, decision-making, subjectivity/objectivity, trust and power differences will be discussed.

(iii) Flexibility

By its very nature, such a method must maintain flexibility in the process in order to respect the needs identified by the community participants and be willing to be changed by them. The circular nature of engagement, reflection on experience, new insights from outside material and further reflection is not an ordered process.

(iv) Accountability

To respect the full participation of those involved and enable them to share responsibility for the process, there must be a constant awareness of how accountability to one another will be achieved. This will also include clarity of the accountability of the participants to their community and the ethicist to her/his academic community.

(v) Telling the Story

Telling the story is the fundamental core of a method that will bring hope and sustain energy. Speaking of the history of an organization, one's personal engagement and family history, the stories that become a part of the collective memory of a community, and connecting these experiences to the biblical story, is the process of weaving threads into a stronger whole.

(vi) Written word

Writing down experiences, stories, analysis and critique, brings another dimension to the process that is crucial. The writing aids in the clarification of issues and is an affirmation of the importance of the participant's own understanding. The publication of the written word brings another added dimension to the sense of empowerment and responsibility.

(vii) Expanding horizons

A method of liberative ethics should not be isolated from experience or learning from outside the context of engagement.

In this project, the impact of outside readings and experience in a developing country was very significant. Reflecting on how significant and formative the Mexico experience was for our group, I would suggest that an experience or connection with an outside community struggling against oppression is mandatory for those engaged in liberative ethics. This experience became a window through which we could see our own community in new ways and a source of hope that "out there" we had partners in the struggle. Although these partners are far away, they are with us often in our discussions and this cross-cultural encounter has opened up new interest in global connections with other communities.

The Women's Collective have expressed their desire to continue to be involved through reading and discussing this thesis with me as it unfolds, in order to continue learning together through this process and to bring a critique from their own experience.

CHAPTER THREE

The Role of an Ethicist and Emergent Issues in Liberative Ethics by a Collective

Working as a collective is a rich, challenging experience that requires diligent attention to such issues as accountability, power and trust. Although I am an integral part of the Women's Collective and this was reaffirmed on a number of occasions, it is evident that I had a distinctive role and responsibility for the initiation and ongoing method in which we engaged. In developing a methodology of liberative ethics, the role of the ethicist and her/his relationship with the community or group engaged in the method, must be very clear. This requires a constant awareness of such issues as accountability, the influence of the ethicist, power differences, subjectivity/objectivity and decision-making. These concerns will be discussed in the light of concrete experiences that arose during the work of the Women's Collective and will refer to learning or critique offered in the literature.

1. Accountability

At our initial session together, questions such as why we were writing a book, who made decisions, how we would function collectively, what my role would be and what relationship our

book would have to my thesis, were all explored. These were important questions of accountability and together we laid the ground rules for our work. This is a crucial step in working out a method that will respect the input, discernment and language of the group, their power to make decisions, and their ownership of the process. The following are the responses to the above questions and some guidelines we established for our work together.

Why would we write a book? When we first discussed this possibility together, I explained how important I felt their work was and their perseverance year after year, in spite of enormous obstacles. I believed that they had valuable insight into the problems that we faced and that we could benefit together from discussing the vision that guided their work and their hopes for the community. However, it was made clear that it would be up to them to decide what they felt was important to write about and what the focus should be.

It was agreed that the process in which we would be engaged and the writing of the book must be of value for the women themselves and their community engagements. Our objective would be to learn more about ourselves and our community, to deepen our understanding of the root causes of the poverty in our community, to study how change has come about and what has empowered us in the work for social transformation.

Their initial hesitancy about what they might have to say was quickly overcome as they responded to the challenge to identify what the core of the struggle was. Melissa summed it up in saying; "Hope is what keeps you going in the struggles you are going to face. Hope is the big word."¹²¹ As we agreed to write of our experience together in organizing for social change in our community and to look at what brought us energy, encouragement and hope, we also realized that this would be a new experience to set aside time to reflect on our lives, our community and our struggles from a broader perspective.

Who would make decisions about what was in the book? Although I would be responsible for typing transcripts from our recorded discussions and preparing write-ups on different topics from these transcripts, the group would receive all material, would decide what discussions were pertinent, where more work was needed and would make revisions together to express what they were trying to convey. A fear was expressed that they may say things that "sound stupid" or would not be understood in print, but it was agreed that we all could help each other change words or sentences to improve what we were trying to say. It was very important to agree that all of our discussions were confidential and that no material could be

¹²¹ See Part I, pp. 16 - 20. This offers some of the initial discussion that identified "hope" as the underlying theme that continued throughout this book.

used without collective approval.

Accountability to the community. There has also been ongoing concern about the impact of our book on people in our community. A sensitivity to how a story or discussion will be received has meant that some sections were omitted or significantly changed to ensure that people will not be offended. Another very important concern is how the "outside" world might misinterpret or misuse their words. A long history of having interviews misused by the media and stories of people living in poverty used as evidence of laziness, irresponsibility or inability to cope rather than a deeper analysis of the root causes of such conditions, has demanded a reconsideration of the inclusion of some material.

After the first draft of the book was written, there was deep concern about the accountability of the collective to their families and the community. Although each section had been revised until it was acceptable to everyone, the effect of seeing the book altogether had a very powerful impact. Now that it looked as though it was actually going to be read by others, there was deep concern about how it would be received.¹²² They decided to leave most sections unaltered,

¹²² Excerpts from our discussion of the first draft of the book during Dialogue 15, Feb. 12, 1995. Myrna; "When we talked about writing this book I was all for it. I am still all for it, but when I was reading it over, I had, in a way, second thoughts about it. I thought, how would I feel about it if my sisters read what I said about my father? I really had second thoughts about it. It is not that I am sorry that we did it, and we will go through with it and we will publish it. But when we talked about it, it was

but were very aware of the risk they were taking and the possible costs.

The same accountability we agreed upon within our collective was extended to the groups that participated in reflection on their work and they would have final approval of anything that would be used from their discussion.

What would my role be? After sharing the transcript of our first working session, the group expressed their disappointment that the written words in a transcript had lost their feeling and the strong emotions that went with them.¹²³

one thing. Now that it is almost done, it is another thing. Elizabeth; "I had a little concern about how my Mom would feel when I mentioned that her husband was an alcoholic, and where I said that if I had it to do over I probably wouldn't have got married so early. I meant that, but I didn't necessarily mean not to him. I probably would have married him anyway. We have a good relationship, but the way it is said here, it is not sure. Everybody reads it differently, so we have to make sure. I just meant I would like to have had a few years before I married him."

Melissa; "I was uncomfortable about some of the things I said... my comments about my brothers are right, but I seem pretty cold and hard on them. I wouldn't want them to think that I don't care about them."

Myrna; "But what Melissa is saying is that we know how each other feels and that is what I found very hard when I was reading this. Because I know what all of you said, I understand everything when I am reading it. But I don't know how that is going to come across for others who don't."

¹²³ Excerpts from transcript of Dialogue, February 3, 1994.

Donna: "I found after reading it [transcript of first dialogue] that there was something missing. I can't say what, but there was a lot missing."

Melissa: "The feelings weren't there. It meant you had to be there!"

Myrna: "It was the enthusiasm [that was missing]. You know we really got into it and it meant a lot to us, what each of us was saying... I thought Faye was going to listen to it and then word it in her own words.... She would come back with

We agreed that I should pull together our discussions around "hope" and "work" in a more descriptive way and bring this back to the group.

Then I was asked; "When you [Faye] are writing this up, are you writing it for us four or us five? Are you in here with us or are you sitting there looking from the outside?"¹²⁴ It was very important for us to discuss our roles and, in particular, how I could continue to be a part of the collective while maintaining my responsibility to direct our discussions and edit our work.¹²⁵ Myrna helpfully

what we as a group got out of it and bring it back to us. I never dreamed you would do it like that."
Melissa: "Its like a play you're just reading lines for."
.....Its like we were actresses with lines, but now you have to put the feelings into it."
Faye: "Next time I'll take out the themes we talked about that were important and then write them up in some way to describe what we were saying then."

¹²⁴ Excerpt from transcripts of Dialogue 15, Feb. 12, 1995, pp. 3, 5, 7.

Melissa; "I thought that there would be more quotes from you [Faye] too. I thought that there was the five of us. Then it became the four of us and then you, writing it. It wasn't like it was the five of us."

Faye; "I found it very hard writing it. I was deciding what was in and what was not, so that there is a lot of me in it."

Melissa; "I know, I can see that. But there are not many "Faye's" quotes. It is like the discussion was the four of us and you were recording it, when it is not like that. You were involved in the discussion with us. So sometimes I feel like, where is Faye?...It is not just us and it is not just you doing the writing and bringing it all together. It is the discussion of all of us. Your input is very important, okay?"

¹²⁵ An excerpt from my Reflections on Dialogue 15, Feb. 12, 1995.

"The discussion about my place within the group was very important for me. I had really struggled with this writing up the chapters and it was obvious to them that I had eliminated

suggested that she understood my role with them to be similar to our participation and responsibility with the Women's Discussion Group, which we co-animate. She explained that although we are responsible for planning sessions, activities and encouraging everyone to participate, we also share our own struggles, joys and problems along with the other women. The decision to be accountable to the whole group for anything that was written was reassuring for us all.

Beverly Harrison discusses the importance of intellectual resources in liberation struggles, but warns that intellectuals who are not able to participate with what she names "authentic mutuality", destroy the possibility of a process that is liberative.¹²⁶ Accountability is at the core of this authentic mutuality and she connects this to solidarity, saying; "Solidarity is accountability, and accountability means being vulnerable, capable of being changed by the oppressed, welcoming their capacity to critique

my voice. It was really very reassuring that they saw this and didn't like it. They also did not like my "interviewer" role when they saw it. It was very reaffirming that they did not see me this way, even though they were clear that I always have a leadership role that guides the discussion along. I need to wrestle with this yet and find a way to incorporate it naturally in the book...

It is also clear that I needed permission from the group to include my reflections in the book. It is strange that I am still so hesitant about that. But, it was so good to hear their comments that I am a part of the Point and even more than some that live here."

¹²⁶ Harrison, op. cit., "Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation", p. 244.

and alter our reality."¹²⁷

Shared accountability was the basis of our work together, but I found that it was important to constantly be pushing at this, encouraging the women to be more critical of the write-ups I compiled in order to be involved in all decisions. There were times when I felt that I had too much control or say in the selection of whose quote to use or what particular discussions to focus on in the write-ups. The women were vigilant in reading this material and making suggestions, but usually did not wish to work on the selection process from the transcripts.

What was the relationship of our book to my thesis? I explained that I was accountable only to the group for our book, what was in it and whether we decided to publish it. However, once the book was finished to our satisfaction, with their agreement, I would use it as the basis for my thesis work. The group decided that "if we agree with the book, with what is written, then it is fine if you use it for your thesis" and they jokingly said that maybe the people in the university could learn something from them. However, they expressed concern that content should not be taken out of context and I gave assurances that I very strongly agreed with that request. It is my intention to share the thesis work with them, both to have their valuable input on my understanding of our work together and to assure their ongoing

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 244.

involvement in the process of developing a method of liberative ethics.

We have had clear understandings of accountability that have helped greatly as we have moved through the process of discussion, analysis and writing. A significant factor that needed to be worked out, was ownership of the process of writing the book.

It was important for me to deal with a critique that I had received from the university that I would in fact be "using" the women for my own ends. I raised this question directly and was assured emphatically that there was no way they would allow that to happen. Their statement that "they trusted me" was the foundation of our shared accountability.¹²⁸

However, there had been other instances of trusting people who had subsequently misquoted the women or distorted their words by lifting them out of context. Although accountability was to some extent based on trust, it would still be up to each one of us to be responsible for what was finally written and to share in the reworking of the text to arrive at a document we could all accept.

Accountability became understood as shared responsibility, which is a far more demanding concept than

¹²⁸ Janet Silman, op. cit., has shared a similar experience in her work with the Tobique women, saying "I soon realized that trust was the relational foundation of the book project in that my relationship with the Tobique women was the rock, or sand, upon which the whole project rested.", p. 69.

adherence to established guidelines by which one reports or "accounts" for one's work. As the women assumed their part in this responsibility, they gained power through the process.

They were the ones who had to make difficult decisions about inclusion or exclusion of material that had the potential of being hurtful to people in the community. There was a strong sense of a wider accountability to both their families and the community, that engaged us in the discussion of difficult ethical choices.

The experience of a woman, who through the Women's Discussion Group and the weekly Worship Group, moved from dependence and fear, to confidence and a real sense of her gifts, has been a very significant symbol of "empowerment" for many of us. When her story was written, the collective was deeply concerned about the effect on her family and so it had to be significantly changed. What is left does not convey adequately, for us, the power of her experience and the role of the community, but it does protect the woman and this became a more important factor.

Writing of Thesis: A further consideration in my role as ethicist relates to my continued accountability to the Women's Collective in the writing of this thesis. The questions posed by Smith and Patai were discussed in the first chapter. Their challenges and my increasing discomfort with the abrupt shift in accountability from the Women's Collective to the academia, led to my insistence that the book Hope in the Struggle in its

entirety be included, not as an Appendix, which had been a prior agreement, but as a Section at the beginning of the thesis itself. The argument I encountered is that a thesis must be a single-authored work that provides a basis for evaluation of a doctoral student. This has raised for me a very significant conflict in accountability.

While understanding the argument from the perspective of the academia, it clearly illustrates the bias against collective work and the barrier that exists to hearing voices from the outside unless they are filtered or interpreted by an academic scholar. This restriction does not respect the significance of the multi-authored writing of the Women's Collective as an integral factor in a methodology based on a commitment to hearing the voices of marginalized women. Nor does it respond to the challenge that, particularly in ethics, the praxis of the academy must reflect its own principles of relating to and being informed by the society at large. I am very grateful for the understanding of my thesis director in supporting and enabling the acceptance of this significant change in academic protocol that has led to the inclusion of Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action as Part I of this thesis.

The agreement of the women of the collective to continue to be engaged in discussing this thesis during its production, has been another step in maintaining accountability to them as well as to the academia.

Sharon Welch discusses how the concept of "universal accountability", which may be understood as responsibility or concern for the well-being of all people, holds within it the danger of being oppressive when this understanding may be based on the experience of one race, gender or class.¹²⁹ On the other hand, there remains the challenge to be able to speak of systems of power and knowledge that may be universally recognized as being oppressive. She states that

The ambiguity intrinsic to a universal basis for resistance to injustice can be mitigated if the concern is expressed in terms of universal accountability rather than in terms of what is universally true about human being.¹³⁰

Although Welch addresses these questions to the presumption of North Americans to speak from a universally applicable definition of freedom and justice, she also raises the corollary to this question, which is the integrity of particularity.

I share with her the belief that definitions of terms such as justice and freedom must be provisional and rooted in the practical. Our reflections on the sources of hope in engagement and the seeds that lead to transformation, are rooted in the particularity of our context that is not transferable. Nevertheless, it is the hypothesis of this thesis, that our experience can provide a method that could have universal implications in engaging oppressed communities

¹²⁹ Welch, op. cit., p. 81.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

in liberative ethics.

2. Action/Reflection

In any group work, no matter how collegially it is structured, there must be an animation or leadership role that enables an agreed upon process to be followed. In our sessions together, it was my responsibility to assure that our reflections were directed towards deepening our understanding of our engagements, the effects on our lives, our families or community and the theological or ethical questions that arose from such actions. There were certainly times when such probing was initiated by others in the group, but I felt the overall responsibility of assuring that this took place.

The women were accustomed to evaluating their programs or activities, setting goals and exploring whatever means necessary to find the resources to meet needs that had been identified in the community. I had been involved with all of these groups to enable them to clarify their objectives and to share in the follow-up work that was required. My intent has always been to provide support for others to assume as much responsibility and ownership of the work as was possible. My role with the writing collective was a continuation of this mode of functioning, but was more directive since we were exploring terrain, such as the more systematic analysis of the theological/ethical questions that arose from their experience, that was new for them.

From the first session, our discussions had an effect on our thinking and our day to day engagements. Myrna spoke of the impact of reading our words about "hope" in the first transcript and said,

I was really impressed with some of the things we said... How many times have we talked about hope over the years? Many times in worship - but it was a stronger thing last time. I don't know why. Even when I was home during the week, I would think of that. It really made a difference. I don't know whether it was the five of us doing it or different comments.¹³¹

The following session we discussed the general write-up I had produced from their discussion on "hope" and Myrna commented again,

It was that section, on "hope", that I talked about being important when I reread what we said. As much as we talk about the hope and what it means for each other, it was reading it over after that made it that much stronger. ...In reading this and thinking about it, it really reinforces that I have come a long way. Who sits down and thinks about that, really? I don't mean that I don't think I'm worthwhile, but we don't stop to think about it and it really made it feel like yes, I'm somebody and I have done something. The comments from the group and other people are important. If you say something and someone else says that they remember when you didn't do that and now you are doing it, it is a reinforcement. It makes you stop and think. You would not do it yourself, but the group makes you think that it is really important.¹³²

It became very clear that the process of writing down their discussions and reading both the transcripts and synthesis of what they said, was producing changes in the

¹³¹ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue, February 3, 1994.

¹³² Excerpts from transcripts of Dialogue, February 18 and March 10, 1994.

women. Their continual involvement in refining and clarifying what they wished to express provided an ownership and claiming of their own capacity to engage in analytical reflection on their experience. This capacity grew and developed as our work together progressed.¹³³

3. Subjectivity/Objectivity

A method of liberative ethics requires that the persons involved be directly engaged in the concrete struggle for liberation (freedom from oppression, seeking a more just society, etc.) and therefore they remain the subjects within the enquiry. As I developed the method we would employ in a collective work that strived to be liberative, the question that was repeatedly raised by the academia, was how I could be objective if I was so implicated and involved in the community

¹³³ Excerpt from my Reflections on week-end Dialogues, Sept. 24, 25, 1994.

"I was amazed at how much input there was in going over our previous dialogues. It was input at another level, that was really more analytical of what they had said. Their reflections on what 'must be in the book' and why were very helpful. I felt they were doing some selective, decision-making work at this time and that they were moving into another mode of functioning. We often became engaged in ethical choices around priorities and understanding of why certain things had been said or were important to retain. It was very productive for them to be given the instructions to highlight, with markers, what is really important and must be kept in our book. It helped them to prioritize, to reflect and state why something was particularly significant.

Before, when we had reviewed a previous dialogue, they were asked if there were places that needed clarifying, changing, or expanding. But I had not asked them to be selective and articulate why. It was a very different discussion because of this request."

work we were discussing.

I believe that we must take seriously the tenants of feminist theory that call for collegial sharing and mutual empowerment with our sisters, particularly with those who historically have had little voice or the resources to participate in ethical reflection on their concerns.¹³⁴

One cannot remain in solidarity with those who live the day to day effects of class, race or gender oppression if there is not a willingness to be affected and influenced personally by their conditions. This will demand the development of research models that respect this commitment and address the possible pitfalls that could arise.

I believe that the expectation of objectivity, in its traditionally understood sense of requiring detachment or separation from emotions and feelings, is not only a delusion in any research project in the humanities, but is not desirable. The selection of a topic, the method of research, the persons or literature consulted and the life experience, context and bias of the researcher, always condition the work. Awareness of subjectivity in research can lead to increased diligence in considering the effects of one's involvement, the

¹³⁴ Claudia Salazar raises this concern in her article in Women's Words - The Feminist Practice of Oral History, in which she states "In rejecting traditional practices rooted in assumptions of the researcher's separateness, neutrality, and distance from the subjects of research, feminist discourse has emphasized, instead, commonality, empathy, and sisterhood. These assumptions also often collide with the realities of actual research situations..."

context and ideology out of which one functions.

With the writing collective, we attempted to step back, to be a bit more "objective" in the sense of looking at a long-term analysis of the changes, the growth and the obstacles to transformation that we had observed in our engagements and personal lives. I believe that we were able to be self-critical and evaluative while remaining deeply involved.

However, through two concrete examples, I saw the potential danger and cost of objectivity. During one session we became engaged quite unexpectedly in a heated discussion about the selling of "hot stuff" in the community¹³⁵ and it was exceedingly stressful for everyone. We returned to this discussion a number of times and the article from "Monday Morality" provided a framework to consider some of the ethical questions this presented. Although it was difficult, each woman was willing to share her own feelings, guilt or questions around buying illegal goods. Much of our discussion was omitted from the book because of the high possibility of misunderstanding or misuse of the information.

There remained a dis-ease with how we had handled this very sensitive topic, that I came to understand as the cost or danger of objectivity. One of the women withdrew from the conversation for a time and was becoming very uneasy. Finally, she decided to try to express what was going on,

¹³⁵ See discussion in Part I, pp. 55 - 60.

saying;

I am just very uncomfortable all of a sudden. I don't think that I am taking it judgemental, personally for me, but I really feel that we have no business talking about this.. . I have a job now and a good salary. I have to admit that I haven't bought anything [hot] for many years. I am sitting here thinking that it is because I have a good job now and if I want something I can go and get it... But if I didn't, how would I feel? All of a sudden I felt, not that you were judging people, but that I was... All of a sudden it just came on me that we were talking about people who do that and why they do it. But who am I to sit here and think is that right or wrong?. I am not them. I just couldn't help it. I don't want to come across as judgemental. I'm really feeling bad about it. I feel like I don't want to do this, but I don't want to lose the importance of what we were talking about.

She felt that she had crossed over some line as she was encouraged to talk about the morality behind buying hot stuff. This woman has a powerful intuitive sense about the essence of solidarity and felt that we had moved to a more judgmental way of looking at people in the community. Using words such as morality, carried us into a more objective consideration of the problem. In taking some distance from the direct situation, there is a risk of objectifying, and therefore not really respecting, the very difficult circumstances that people in our community experience. It was like becoming an outsider to observe a situation and this felt like betrayal. This can be the cost of objectivity!

Dorothy Smith speaks of the "point of rupture" as a line of fault that exists between our experience in the everyday world and what occurs as this is expressed in structured modes

of thinking, which for her, is within the field of sociology.¹³⁶ She discusses women's search for new language to speak of our experience, in order to make it social and thus political, without crossing over this rupture into structured objective modes of thinking that are divorced from this experience.

Although I am committed to respecting the wisdom that arises from the "refiner's fire of people's everyday lives"¹³⁷, it is also a temptation for me to offer a rational explanation or approach to a problem too readily. In my own personal reflections on a discussion¹³⁸ that occurred a year after we had begun our work together, I wrote

We had a very tough discussion on words for "poor" again. It is always shocking for me to discover how I can shift into a more objective approach to such a discussion without meaning to or realizing it. I had felt so positive about the word "impoverished" as a breakthrough in terminology that would help us, that I wasn't able to take the time or give the space for that word to be tried

¹³⁶ Introducing the discussion of this line of fault Smith states; "This inquiry into the implications of a sociology for women begins from the discovery of a point of rupture in my/our experience as woman/women within the social forms of consciousness - the culture of ideology of our society - in relation to the world known otherwise, the world directly felt, sensed, responded to, prior to this social expression." (Smith, op. cit., p. 49) Her work is relevant to the field of ethics, in which concepts of morality or the organized expression of systems of values, whose construction elicits a rupture from everyday reality. This is a challenge to seek out a liberative methodology that remains rooted in subjective experience.

¹³⁷ Part II, p. 225.

¹³⁸ See discussion on "Poor, living in poverty, low income or impoverished?", Part I, pp. 51 - 55.

on. The message seemed to be clear that, yes, it rationally sounded like a better word, but it still didn't sound quite right. It is the feel of the word that is so important, and changing for another word doesn't escape the judgement of the poor being "dirty" no matter how you name it.¹³⁹

If being "objective" is understood as being "without bias or prejudice; detached;"¹⁴⁰, this cannot be a goal of a method of feminist liberative ethics. I would also suggest that it is not defensible in any ethical enquiry. To lose sight of or detach oneself from the feelings, hopes and aspirations of people whose values one endeavours to understand, is to lose solidarity.

The anthropologist Margaret Trawick confronts the impossibility of objectivity in her ethnographic study of a Tamil community and in discussing what drew her to this community she declares,

I have not attempted to be "objective" in the common sense of this term. I have never pretended to be disinterested or uninvolved in the lives of my informants, and I have never set my own feelings aside.¹⁴¹

She became more adamant throughout her study of the inability to enter into another culture with any real understanding and that the most she could do was to write of the interface between two cultures. She felt that her best ethnography was

¹³⁹ Excerpt from my Reflections, January 26, 1995.

¹⁴⁰ Neufeldt, Victoria E., Editor, Webster's New World Dictionary of American English, Simon & Schuster, New York, p. 934.

¹⁴¹ Trawick, Margaret, Notes on Love in a Tamil Family, University of California Press, California, 1992, p. 2.

carried out when she lived in a Tamil household, not engaging in interviews, but simply waiting and listening.¹⁴² Her methodology was based on engagement and an acceptance of the limitation of defining reality.

In another ethnographic study, Karen McCarthy Brown faced her own personal engagement and deepening involvement in her research into Haitian voodoo. She writes of her changing role as scholar and researcher, and her decision to leave her theorizing embedded in the stories she heard. She concludes that

ethnographic research... is a form of human relationship. When the lines long drawn in anthropology between participant-observer and informant break down, then the only truth is the one in between.¹⁴³

In disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography, the place for objectivity is being challenged. It is even more evident that it is both irrelevant and inappropriate to be critical of intense involvement, in a method of feminist liberative ethics. This does not preclude the ability to evaluate and critique this engagement. My role with the Women's Collective has never been as a participant-observer, but as a participant with them in their struggles over the years and as a catalyst to encourage them to tell and write their own story.

¹⁴² Ibid., pp. 50, 51.

¹⁴³ McCarthy Brown, Karen, Mama Lola - A voodoo Priestess in Brooklyn, University of California Press, California, 1991, p. 12.

The work of Janet Silman with native women of the Tobique reserve has been most helpful to me, in challenging and clarifying the subjectivity/objectivity tension in ethical reflection. She discusses this dimension of her methodology through a consideration of the subjective and objective dimension of knowledge,¹⁴⁴ which she understands as a dialectic between what we understand through intimate communion and a distanced viewpoint of the world. However this "distance" does not require disengagement, but rather a collective immersion in seeking understanding from the sharing of differing viewpoints. She cites the work of Carol S. Robb, who explains her revisioning of the understanding of objectivity from a feminist perspective:

Feminist objectivity is a social product, resulting when people put forward their perspectives, are self-assertive, hear the perspectives of self-assertive others, particularly who carry the brunt of the decision, and allow themselves to be challenged and changed in the hearing... Further, objectivity is not a condition of being removed from involvement, but a result of some reflection on immersion, with people who are also immersed, but in a different part of the situation.¹⁴⁵

I find that this is a very helpful understanding of feminist objectivity that captures the sense of deep engagement and critical listening. It also underscores my belief that one cannot engage in this level of sharing with other diverse communities before one has a voice. The method

¹⁴⁴ Silman, op. cit., pp. 42 - 52.

¹⁴⁵ Robb, Carol S., Gender Justice and Feminist Sexual Ethics: Challenges to the Center", mimeographed paper, p.3.

of feminist liberative ethics we have employed, addresses the particularity of our experience and this could be the beginning step to more exchanges with other communities that have found their voice through theological/ethical reflection.

4. Solidarity

The Point is a community that has a long history of standing together and a concrete understanding of the meaning of solidarity. The four women agreed to participate in the reflections and analysis of our experience in order to strengthen our engagement in the hard struggle to fight against oppression, but were constantly aware that what we would write could be misunderstood or hurtful. Solidarity took on new meaning during our discussions as we discussed what it meant to be in solidarity with our community, with women, with the working-class, with global partners and with those of other cultures or races.

Solidarity with our community

A recurrent question in our discussions was the effect of organizations or activities on the well-being and sense of empowerment of people in our community. The most difficult group self-evaluation was that done by the women involved in the worker's co-operative, the Point At Work (P.A.W.) This project arose out of a vision of our community done by the Women's Discussion Group in which there would be work that was

of value to the community and was controlled by the workers.¹⁴⁶ The participants in the co-operative are deeply disturbed by their inability to provide something of value for their community.

Melissa said; "That was one of the things that kept me going with Reupholstery. We were going to reach the poor - people that really needed it. That was what kept me on and now, that is not what is happening. We have known we haven't been able to do this for the last couple of years. There are people here who really could use the furniture, but there is no way we will ever be able to reach them, unless we could do it for nothing. These are people that get their furniture out of the alleys. There are many, many families in the Point that need our service but could never pay even our "fixed-income" price for it. We have helped some fire victims and we use donated material to keep the price as low as possible for those on welfare and low incomes, but I just feel that our Upholstery project cannot help the poor. We reach people on low-incomes, to redo kitchen chairs, etc. - but not the poor."¹⁴⁷

The solidarity with people of the community is evident, but the need for the workers in the co-op to survive on their income, has made it impossible to achieve this goal. There is a deep sadness that they have been unable to beautify the home environment in which their neighbours live, but even though this goal is on hold for the short term, it remains.

This discussion pushed us further into an ongoing search for an alternative to the word "poor" that would express the

¹⁴⁶ Part I, p. 95, "The three goals of the co-operative are (1) to provide stable employment, (2) to do something that was creative and of value and (3) to provide a service to our community that would particularly help those who had very little money."

¹⁴⁷ Part I, p. 100.

socio-economic conditions clearly, without the humiliating impact this word had on them and still remaining in solidarity with "the poor" globally. The experience in Mexico had opened their eyes to identifying, in a political way, the poverty that is around them and their relation to it.

Elizabeth; "I was kind of on the outside looking in and when I went to Mexico, I guess I saw everything and when I came back my eyes were opened..."

Melissa; "It is when I came back that I felt poor, coming from this area. I felt like 'Have I been poor and I never even really realized that?'... We have to struggle for every cent we make and then it is gone. Now I am not working and I feel more poor than I ever have in my life. But then I had never looked at myself that way before. I think that is how people in the Point look at themselves. They don't look at themselves as being poor. It has been there all our lives, so you don't even notice it... But actually, it has been very good for me because that is what has kept me involved in trying to make changes - for myself and for other people."¹⁴⁸

This heightened awareness of solidarity would not have come without the questioning that led to a deeper reflection, through articulating their experience and helping one another to make connections between communities. Solidarity must be identified and named if it is to be the source of further energy and support in the struggle against any form of oppression. It is in the naming that we reposition ourselves and rethink the consequences of our learning. The encouragement to do this naming is a very important role of the ethicist.

¹⁴⁸ Excerpts from transcripts of Dialogue 19, May 30, 1995, p. 7.

This raises a very important question about the extent to which an outsider, or one engaging in a method of liberative ethics, is trusted as being in solidarity with the community. I am very much a part of the hopes and struggles of our community, but did find that in writing up our collective discussions, there were some situations in which I had some hesitancy about including myself in the "we". This was identified immediately by the other women and we discussed this apparent distancing:

Faye; "I found it really hard to know how to do it and who I was when I was writing it. I never felt like saying "they" - except when we were talking about the community. You were talking about your community. I feel very connected to Point St. Charles, but I don't live here."

Melissa; "There are some people we don't accept because they are outsiders. But you have become a different type of outsider."

Donna; "When it came to "we", I accepted you as part of that "we".¹⁴⁹

This clarification was very important for me and I particularly appreciated the designation of me as a "different type of outsider". The people of this community are so refreshingly direct!

A very unfortunate incident became the occasion to speak further about our understanding of what it means to be in solidarity. The Women Against Contamination (W.A.C.) committee had worked with a paediatrician from McGill and the

¹⁴⁹ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 15, February 12, 1995, p. 3.

Montreal Children's Hospital for over two years on the project to test for heavy metals in the blood and urine of small children in our community. He was interested in doing lead testing only, but at our insistence he had agreed to enlarge the protocol to include arsenic, chromium, mercury and cadmium as well, since the land in the community has been identified as highly contaminated with these heavy metals.¹⁵⁰

The committee was interviewed about the project by CBC and although the doctor was present with us, he was subsequently interviewed by himself. We were shocked to hear his viewpoint on radio the following morning. He declared that in his opinion we would find no heavy metal contamination in the children, but since it would make the community feel better, he was going along with this testing. He stated that he thought the health problems we were concerned about were caused by high levels of smoking and poor housing conditions. As a professional, his words carried great weight, the years of research done by the women on the land pollution were trivialized and the women felt that they were being patronized by him.

Although we had been aware of his vested interest in his own project and that we had differences of opinion, we had believed that he was an ally. We called a meeting to discuss our perception that he had betrayed us and he stated that he

¹⁵⁰ See description of this project in Part I, pp. 83 - 85.

did not have to believe in what we were concerned about, to work with us. It was evident that he had no understanding of solidarity and although we have proceeded with the testing with his help, he is no longer considered trustworthy.

This experience helped the group to clarify that although being in solidarity does not necessarily mean always being in agreement, it does require a profound trust, respect and common commitment. As one woman expressed it, "his feet weren't in the right place". Beverly Harrison takes this one step further in saying; "Genuine solidarity involves not mere subjective identification with oppressed people but concrete answerability to them".¹⁵¹ It will be the oppressed people themselves who can say whether we are in solidarity with them.

Solidarity with Women

A very fundamental objective of the Women's Collective has been to name and work against the oppression experienced by women. This is a very important part of the work of the four groups the women represent - the Women's Discussion Group, the Point Adult Centre for Education, the Worship Group and the Point At Work co-operative. My engagement in developing a methodology of feminist liberative ethics is grounded in the analysis of the systemic nature of the oppression of women and the vital importance of making the links between women, across the potential boundaries of class

¹⁵¹ Harrison, op. cit., p. 244.

and race. My role therefore, within the collective, has been to both deepen our understanding of the place of women within a working-class community and to make connections with women outside our milieu.

Moving from a supportive role with women who are friends and neighbours, to the sense of solidarity with women who are oppressed by virtue of their sex, is a crucial step in the process of liberative ethics. For Melissa, this was a very significant learning that came through her encounters with women in Mexico. I asked the group to discuss how they had been changed personally and in their work by this experience and Melissa replied;

What hit me the most was the women. I never thought of the women in the Point being controlled by men in any way, until I was in Mexico. When I got back, then my eyes were opened more. I never realized that women had to ask their spouses for permission, for money, how it was going to be spent and to deal with abuse. It was only when I got back...

Faye; "You had been part of the women's group where a lot of that discussion had taken place, before you went to Mexico. These are things you had talked about before. I remember you talking about control of money and how much it was a problem that you were so controlled in your previous marriage. What do you think makes the difference?"

Melissa; "But that was for me! I just didn't see that this was a problem for all the women, or at least many of them, to keep their independence or have their own minds. Physical abuse too - your eyes are closed to it I think, until you see it in another poverty-stricken community and then you see

it when you get back. It hit home and it hurt.¹⁵²

Melissa knew women in the community who were physically abused and she herself had struggled to be free of a very humiliating, psychologically abusive relationship. However, for her, the broader analysis of the problem and the solidarity with women that developed, was in response to what she had heard and seen in a context completely outside her milieu.

A heightened sense of solidarity with women came from reading about the discrimination and oppression of women in chapters from Marilyn Waring's book, If Women Counted and Meg Luxton's article Two Hands for the Clock - Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division of Labour in the Home.¹⁵³ Unveiling the gendered bias of the economy was the most powerful way of entering into an ethical discussion about economic values. Myrna has had years of experience in the analysis of women's conditions through our co-animation of the Women's Discussion Group, but the reading of these articles deepened her sense of connectedness to broader struggles faced by women. In discussing the impact of these readings, she said;

But I think that the strong point in this is the value of women. For me that reinforced how important we are, the belief that we have in women, the work they do and what they can do. You can't just put them in a box and close the lid. They are out now and going to go... I wonder if women's

¹⁵² Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 19, May 30, 1995, p. 8.

¹⁵³ Waring, op. cit. and Luxton, op. cit.

salaries are kept down, not only to save money, but it also keeps men's egos up... and because they are making more it makes them think they are better. The woman might do just as good a job,...but because of men's egos, because of the status that they are the bread-winners, men are the better people, while women are lower, slaves, underfoot - that's why the wages are never the same... Now that I have read the statistics and the things they say there, I can see that it is part of our wage system in Canada that keeps it that way.¹⁵⁴

The women had been asked to mark up their articles with their own questions and comments, which became the basis of our discussion. They made the immediate connections with what they experience in their own families and community, and from this developed a deeper understanding of the issues underlying such inequities. However, most women will not identify themselves as feminists, even though they would so clearly be considered that with any definition I have ever seen of the word. This strong uneasiness with feminism is related, I feel, to the lack of connectedness of feminism with class struggle.

The participation in the "Bread and Roses March Against Poverty" has been identified by the collective as the most significant bridge of solidarity between women throughout Québec, "as women of all ages, races, cultural backgrounds, languages and social classes joined together in a common cause".¹⁵⁵ In the planning and the marches themselves, women

¹⁵⁴ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 9, June 28, 1994, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ Part I, p. 212 - 213.

from impoverished communities played a very important role and felt the strong support of women from other classes. It is a long road ahead to build bridges of understanding and support across class lines. I feel that this will only happen as women are able to voice their concerns out of the particularity of their own experience¹⁵⁶ and then, from a position of some strength and respect, search for the links that can reinforce or support each other.

Class Solidarity

The strong community spirit of people from the Point goes beyond neighbourhood identification to a solidarity with the

¹⁵⁶ In feminist theology, sociology and ethics, the significance of "difference" is being explored. The Womanist perspective in particular, has offered new insights into the understanding of difference as a positive starting point in feminist theory. In a very helpful article, "The Notion of Difference for Emerging Womanist Ethics", in the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Spring/Fall 1993, Vol. 9 Number 1 - 2, Audrey Lourde writes that "It [difference] is a methodological tool for understanding and constructing nondominant social mutuality and vision" (p. 46) and bell hooks states that "difference becomes a category that illuminates the collective's ability to culturally visit oppression, on the one hand, and not only to survive, but to flourish, on the other hand" (p. 47). Pamela Brubaker, in her thesis (Rendering the Invisible Visible: Methodological Constraints on Economic Ethics in Relation to Women's Impoverishment, Doctoral thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 1989), an analysis of women's work through the World Council of Churches over the last two decades, concludes that the strength of women's solidarity will come through making connections that are built on the commitment to understand the cultural, social and economic differences of women.

working-class. The stories of experiences in high school and the collective history of a community that has fought to maintain itself are the roots of this solidarity, that most often expresses itself as over against those with privilege.

In our discussion of the article on the gendered division of labour in the home¹⁵⁷, there was a strong feeling that the women who had been interviewed for this study, were clearly not from an impoverished community, were not single parents and seemed to be from the middle-class. Although there were some helpful insights from the article, the collective felt that the responses of women from our community would have been very different, had they been asked the same questions. As one woman expressed it;

I think the women of the Point would come out a lot more independent and stronger on their survival. This book was from people who had money and husbands. The community here is different. It's about survival. Women are more independent in the sense that, whatever they do is because they have to do it. If they stay home to look after their children, they collect welfare because they have no choice. Society is not offering any other choice for them. But even in welfare families, where they both stay home, women do more than men.¹⁵⁸

This awareness of class differences was very evident in our discussions about the outings of the Women's Discussion Group. The fear of not appreciating a symphony orchestra because it was not a part of one's upbringing, not having the

¹⁵⁷ Luxton, op. cit.

¹⁵⁸ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 9, June 28, 1994, p.12

proper clothes to wear or perhaps, saying the wrong things, had prevented one of the women from attending. Many of the women had to overcome these fears before they could actually decide to attend, but in spite of this, it was a very wonderful, unique experience that the women talk about even two years later.

Another woman spoke of how it was also difficult to attend the Centaur Theatre, even though these outings have been such a highlight, and she shared some of her concerns:

What if someone spoke to you and you didn't speak properly or something. I always feel like I'm going to be belittled. It is the worst fear. Even when we go to the Centaur. I always avoid talking to people because I don't want them to know I come from Point St. Charles. Not that I am ashamed of Point St. Charles, but I just don't want them to classify me.¹⁵⁹

The problem of being classified by others is an humiliating experience. In all our discussions, there was a clear sense of ownership of a working-class identity¹⁶⁰ and a deep appreciation of the feelings of solidarity that are always present, if not expressed.

In my work with the collective and the ongoing groups I am engaged with, it has been very important to be able to deal with the question of class and privilege very directly. I am a middle-class professional, whose education and leadership

¹⁵⁹ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 10, Sept. 24, 1994, p.4.

¹⁶⁰ People do not use the term "working-class" for themselves and would be more likely to use "workers".

skills can be seen as an asset in our community work, as long as I am working in solidarity with the people. This requires an authentic commitment in the causes we are engaged in and a genuine respect for the wisdom, skills and potential of those with whom I work. Our ability to discuss my experiences within a middle-class milieu, with both criticism and appreciation, and our critique of those whose privilege often keeps them isolated from understanding the more basic, fundamental realities of life, has allowed us to build a trusting relationship through respecting differences.

A fundamental criteria for an ethicist engaged with an impoverished community in the work of social transformation and ethical reflection, is the commitment to work to change the inequalities in the unjust system from which one has and is profiting. A socialist perspective provides the framework to critique the power structures that maintain class differences and continue to oppress those who live in poverty.

Global Solidarity

When the women from the Point encountered impoverished people in Mexico who were involved in community development work, they sensed immediately a very strong connection to and understanding of their struggles.¹⁶¹ They have been profoundly changed by this experience and have developed a

¹⁶¹ See descriptions of the impact of the Mexico encounters in Part I, pp. 156 - 179.

sense of solidarity through this encounter, with others who face similar class oppression. They have identified their developing interest in stories of people from other countries on the news and a sense of being connected with them.

During our time in Mexico, there were discussions on the effects of colonialism, the destruction of the indigenous peoples and the ongoing racism that is another level of oppression. We became more aware of these dynamics in our day to day visits and walks in the city. This has had a very important impact on the awareness of racism in our own community and country.

Through this process of reflection, we have been building an awareness of the interconnections between oppression based on race, class and gender. Class and gender related issues have been the focus of our work, but the experience in Mexico helped to develop the connections with structural racism. Subsequent visits of people from Zaire and Peru, and further analysis of the effects of the global economy on women, the poor and people of developing countries, have helped us to continue in this direction.

There have also been difficult experiences in dealing with the conflict in loyalties or accountability that arise. The women in an impoverished community will face sexism at home, in the community and in the workplace, but also have continued to be very aware of an increasing level of violence against women that is related to the despair of unemployed men

who see no role or future for themselves. This has not led to increased acceptance of such behaviour, but there is a different level of understanding of a shared powerlessness.

The sense of solidarity with the most marginalized - welfare recipients, people with disabilities, the unemployed, seniors - who have been abandoned by a society that no longer wants or needs its labour and skills, is very strong.

5. Power and Risk

An objective of a methodology of liberative ethics is the empowerment of those who are oppressed as they assume responsibility, not only for their engagement in social transformation, but also for the articulation of the values, meaning and hope that undergirds their involvement. Therefore my responsibility was to provide the opportunity and the support for the women to engage in this reflection, to assist them through questions that led to further analysis and to provide outside materials that would stimulate this discussion further. This dynamic left far more decision-making power in my hands and I was always conscious of the danger of this imbalance.¹⁶²

¹⁶² It also meant that the group was dependent on me for the process to continue and were governed by my ability to physically keep up with typing transcripts or write-ups. After our initial session, I had suggested that we meet once a month and was met with expressions of incredulity. They asked if I was really serious about the project and that if it was important, we would have to meet at least every two weeks! So the decision-making and power was shared in different ways.

On the other hand, it was so clear that the four women possessed the deep understanding and first-hand knowledge of a lifetime of experience in an impoverished community that was the real core of all our work together. A mutual acknowledgement of the different skills that we brought to the collective and the trust that our common objective was to enable each of us to be strengthened as we developed further understanding, permitted us to work together over the two years without conflict.

The ultimate goal, to strengthen ongoing work in the community, brings a different power dynamic into play. Rina Benmayor discusses her experience in a Popular Education centre in East Harlem, New York and the need to develop research models that will strengthen the ongoing work of the community. She states that

Action research has the potential to reposition the researcher/subject power relationship in many ways. It creates a social space and a dynamic of reciprocity that give participants the power to make meaningful contributions to their own community... researchers and community members collaborate to strengthen collective returns to community.¹⁶³

The key in power sharing lies in working together towards a common goal and thus avoiding the dangers of appropriation that are a major concern in feminist ethics.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Gluck & Patai, ed., op. cit., p. 172.

¹⁶⁴ Emilie Townes, in her article, "Appropriation and Reciprocity in the doing of Feminist and Womanist Ethics"; *Annals of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1993, writes; "The Particularity of women's lives is the essence of who they are

There are risks in being engaged in a project such as ours and, now that our book has been published, we are seeing the costs more clearly. Although there was great excitement in the community when the book was published and people were proud that "someone they knew had written a book", there has been very little comment on the content. One partner was very ashamed of how he was portrayed and did not want his family to read the book. People who were involved through the reflections done by different organizations have responded positively to the stories of the community.

The women in the collective grew in their capacity to reflect from a theological and ethical perspective and their stories and comments came from a vast pool of discussion in which their neighbours and other staff did not share. It is as though the collective is perceived as separating themselves in some ways. This has been very painful since the goal of the work was so linked to furthering our understanding of how

and the substance of their communities. This is `their stuff` and women approaching their material as if it can be taken *carte blanche* and interpreted through other lenses of experience with no question or attempt to understand the culture it comes from and the lives it represents, does violence not only to that culture, but wreaks havoc on measured attempts at scholarship that seek to be truly liberatory ethics." (p.188) Katie Cannon, in her article, "Appropriation and Reciprocity in the Doing of Womanist Ethics" in the same issue, questions "Can there be appropriation without intellectual domination?" and "What are the tradeoffs in our movement from orality to textuality?" (pp. 193, 194)

and why people become involved in community work in order to strengthen our network. Is it a question of power or privilege that is at stake?

Although the group is delighted at the very positive response of people outside the community and in the church milieu, that does not assuage the disappointment of the local response. However, this has opened doors to further dialogue and access with non working-class people who have found new insights through the book.

6. Multiplicity of Roles

In this project, I have been in relationship with others in the collective in a variety of roles - director of our centre, convenor of the Women's Collective, participant, friend, editor of our book, pastor, theologian, professional ethicist, learner and thesis writer. Although these roles are interconnected and overlapping, it is helpful to reflect on the particular effect each of these roles has had on our work together.

(i) As Director of our centre, St. Columba House, I see my role as enabling others to take on responsibility; working collectively to discern the needs of our community; seeking with others to find the resources to meet these needs; engaging the people with whom we work in developing their vision, goals and objectives; providing leadership in worship and biblical reflection from the perspective of liberative

theology arising from the community experience; linking with congregations to share in mission; engaging in social-economic analysis locally and regionally; and being involved in actions, organizing and development work for social transformation.

Although my role as director would not be formally articulated in this way in our community or the church to which I am accountable, I feel that it would be generally understood in these terms. Therefore, my engagement with the Women's Collective was coherent with my perceived role in our community. Our work became a progression or extension of what we had previously been involved in and, by virtue of my position, it was acceptable to others that I would give leadership in this way.

(ii) My role as convenor of the group of women to write a book, flows from the above understanding of my work at St. Columba House and my engagement in both the community and the church. Through my years of work in various programs or projects, I have come to know those who have particular gifts of vision, tenacious commitment and discernment. Five women had been invited by me to participate in the Mexico trip and their capacity to engage in dialogue with the theological students and their thirst for deeper understanding through connecting with Mexicans in development work, encouraged me to invite four of them to participate in the book writing.

They did not question my role as convenor of this group,

but they did question why they had been invited. This selection of a few in the midst of a community that works together has produced some difficulties for us all. Although it would have been more respectful of our usual practise of groups naming their own representation, I felt that this work would require, as well as their long-term engagement in the work for social change, the foundational experience of feminist liberative theology that has been developed over the years in our Worship Group. As convenor of the group, I had the power to define the criteria I felt would be necessary to engage in this work together and I feel that this was my responsibility to invite these women to take a further step. In taking on this role of convening the group, I bypassed the possibility of greater ownership of the process from the groups they represent and this is a legitimate criticism of the method I employed.

(iii) I have discussed previously the complex nature of being a participant in a method that required me to take on many other roles. However, I was accepted as a full participant and felt this most profoundly as a common search to understand the sources of hope in our work together. Although I felt a responsibility to animate the process, I was always aware that I never asked questions to which I knew the answer. We pushed each other through sharing our lives, dissecting the meaning of our involvement and asking ethical questions because we needed to try to find answers. The role

of participant was dependent on mutual respect, risk and trust. This was essential to our method and these factors were also a significant part of the criteria I used in convening the group. On the few occasions when I slipped into interviewer mode in the write-ups, I was challenged on this immediately and was invited back in as a participant. We were all conscious of the significance of this distinction and vigilant in ensuring this as a basis of our relationship.

(iv) My role as friend with the women of the collective has continued and deepened. There is increasing concern in the discipline of theological education about appropriate boundaries of those in ministry. I am very aware of the potential dangers that can arise, but my experience of friendship with those in the project has not interfered with other roles I must assume in our work together. As deep sharing occurs, it is inevitable that friendship will develop. I feel that I must always be aware of the potential conflict this might pose and areas of sharing that might not be appropriate, but the development of deep friendship has expanded our capacity to work together. The concern for me has not been the effect of this role within the collective and our ongoing relationships, but the potential for misunderstanding or jealousies of those in the community.

(v) My role as editor gave me more power in the structure and direction of the book than I would have wished. Although this was mitigated by the constant reading and

reworking by the collective of all material that went into the book, I would have preferred others to be more involved in this work. However, my skills in writing and organizing material were very necessary for the project and as long as this role encourages others to be involved as much as they are able, it can augment the liberative process.

(vi) As a pastor, I have been involved with some of the women in dealing with family crises and their own personal struggles. This has given me a very privileged understanding of their life situations and those matters that are not discussed openly. My pastoral role has undoubtedly allowed for a level of trust that an outsider may otherwise have more difficulty establishing. In the Worship Group we have shared both our community hopes and our own faith journey with an openness that has allowed for pastoral care one to another. My role as a minister has enabled me to push the deeper faith questions and to continue to do this within the Women's Collective.

(vii) As a theologian, I have engaged the women in a quest for a liberative theology that comes from our particular experience of oppression and is linked to the gospel call to be justice seekers. We have sought together to articulate what this means in our context and how to engage others in speaking of their faith. The book has been one means to do this and through my own knowledge of the field of feminist theology, I was able to select readings that challenged our

own theological understandings. These readings have also served to validate our own theology and to be encouraged by the growing movement of people engaged in developing liberative theologies.

Our early years in the Worship Group were a time of encouraging participants to seek out the wisdom of God that came from their own experience and to believe that theology was more than the academic training that I could bring to our discussion. This experience was the bridge to engaging in theological/ethical reflection in writing a book on the sources of hope in their work for social transformation.

(viii) My role as a "professional" ethicist has enabled me to bring tools of analysis and give direction to our ethical reflections. The core of my thesis is the conviction that ethical reflection must be done by those who, from their life experiences and communities, are posing the value questions that must be answered in order for them to do their jobs well.

However, there is a specific role of the professional ethicist, in using her/his training and knowledge in order to help people to do this work themselves. The professionalism of many disciplines such as ethics and theology, and the difficult language employed, has often excluded the ordinary person from such discourse. This is particularly true of working-class people who feel they are limited by their lack of academic achievement. Ethicists must seek new ways to

engage communities in articulating the values by which they live and encouraging the development of language that is accessible to the non-professional. I experienced great difficulty in finding literature on the subject that spoke to the concerns of an impoverished community, but the introduction of analytical material from another class context did provide a stimulus to respond or react to, in the process of developing an understanding of a community's values. My role as professional ethicist required a more directive approach in animating our discussions and taking responsibility for connecting to outside literature. This role has led me to be even more critical of the failure of the field of ethics to engage non-professionals in ethical reflection and to acknowledge the wisdom from base communities that is crucial in understanding our society's value systems.

(ix) As important as all the roles that I have carried in this project, is the role of learner. It has been clear that I worked with others in the collective, not just to enable them to expand and share their knowledge, but to learn from them the answer to my fundamental question; "What is the source of the hope that keeps you committed to the long term struggle for social transformation within your community?" This is a profoundly ethical and theological question that is at the core of all my work in our community. I have participated in many strategies and programs for social change and had observed this powerful force. Although I could have

deduced certain fundamental principles and developed a theology from my experience in the community, it is the women who have lived this marginalization that have been my teachers and have articulated the meaning of hope in their own language. This kind of learning has profoundly changed me in the process.

(x) The role of writing a thesis has been both a catalyst and a liability in this process. It was only when I put aside all thoughts of the thesis to engage in the collective writing of a book, that I was able to convene the group of women and begin our task with openness. Although I declared from the outset that the book would be a part of my thesis work, it was essential that it be understood by all that this would have no impact on our collective writing. This was very liberating for me and avoided any potential conflict of interest. It allowed us to go in directions that the group determined and the book took its own form.

After the completion of the book, as I began work on the thesis, I discovered the extent to which I had been challenged and changed by the process. The book could not be an Appendix, but had to be an integral part of the thesis. I was also reluctant to leave the women of the collective behind as I entered the "academic world". This was inconsistent with everything we had learned together and the essential message of my thesis. The roles that have been previously identified are very interconnected and there was a danger that my role,

as thesis writer, would be divorced from the process. The willingness of the women of the Collective to read and comment on this thesis has enabled me to engage in this academic endeavour and at the same time, to maintain the awareness of how what I write will be heard by them. My accountability to the community has not been compromised by my accountability to the academia.

In summary, these considerations of the role of an ethicist in relation to those with whom she is engaged in a method of feminist liberative ethics suggests the following elements, concerns and questions that must be considered in developing a methodology.

Accountability is the fundamental key in developing a method that will be respectful of input from the community and the ethicist. It was imperative that the reasons for engaging in the process be acceptable to everyone at the outset, that there be inherent value in the process that would benefit those involved in their ongoing work and that there be an end goal in mind. Clarifying how decisions will be made collectively and ensuring that this happens is an important responsibility of the ethicist. Welcoming and encouraging flexibility in the process and content of discussion, enables the collective to have decision-making power where there is authentic mutuality. Accountability is grounded in the broader commitment to the goals and hopes of a community

engaged in collective work for social change and work that is published must respect this.

Seeing their reflections in written form and being involved in the selection and refining of this writing, has had, in itself, transformative power for the women of the collective and is a significant element to be considered in the methodology.

Subjectivity is a desired stance in a methodology of feminist liberative ethics and the valuing of disengaged objectivity in research will serve to block, rather than enhance, new learning in enabling the voices of marginalized women to be heard.

Solidarity is an integral concept of feminist liberative ethics and developing interconnections between communities demands a respect for difference as the basis of relationship. A liberative methodology will explore difference as a methodological tool for building broader social vision.

A method that is liberative must take account of the power dynamics between the ethicist and the community with which she/he is engaged in research, in order to work towards a sharing of control of the process that encourages those who have been excluded from ethical discourse, to take power and have a voice.

CHAPTER IV

Hope as Integral to the Methodology

Hope is central to a methodology of feminist liberative ethics. That which is liberative is tied to a vision of how things should or could be and this vision, which is grounded in the present, is embedded in the concrete work for transformation towards a more just future. A study of why hope was selected as the theme of the book written by the Women's Collective, their understanding of hope that came through reflection on their experience, hope as the source of the energy that helps people to persevere in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the hope that arises from the very process of reflection and articulation, will lay the groundwork for positing the centrality of hope in a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

1. How "Hope" is perceived

The initial statement, that "It is always hope that keeps you going. So hope is the good word."¹⁶⁵, opened up a discussion on hope that continued for two years. The dialectic nature of hope, as being that which is both so present and yet elusively beyond, was understood through the

¹⁶⁵ Part I, p. 16.

concrete experience of everyday struggles. The upholstery cooperative, P.A.W., became the focus of the first discussion about hope, not because it was easy to see where the hope was, but because it represented a project in which the initial high expectations were not fulfilled and it was a challenge to discern why four women still persevered in this work. The determination to understand the nature of this hope is evident in the following excerpts of our discussion:

Melissa; "I find it [hope] is work. It's a struggle all the time. That's why I say it is 'out there'. It is so much work... Upholstery has been a struggle from the beginning and I feel we still are at the beginning, four years later."

After a lengthy discussion, comparing their situation with the long, hard struggle P.A.C.E. engaged in, Myrna suggested; "The struggle is the hope. You know, it works together. They [P.A.W.] are struggling, but they are working damn hard to make sure that hope comes through and it is going to work. There's hope there. You can't say there is no hope!"

Melissa; Well, no! There is hope. That's why we keep going."¹⁶⁶

Hope is not understood as being tied to success, but instead is related to a fundamental belief in what one is engaged in and hope may be expressed in the tenacity of continuing against great odds. Hope is perceived to be at the heart of resistance and this understanding became clearer after many discussions of the biblical parable of the Gold

¹⁶⁶ Excerpts from transcript of Dialogue 1, January 20, 1994.

Coins.¹⁶⁷ The man who hid his coins out of fear, had accused the king of taking what was not his and was condemned to death. The scandal of the ending would appear to have destroyed any hope for justice, until the significance of this man's resistance became the focus. "That is where the hope is, in the man who stood up and spoke out."¹⁶⁸ The recounting of how many local groups and people had resisted at great cost, was linked to well-known historical figures and countries who have engaged in long struggles against violent, oppressive systems. We concluded that hope is not necessarily tied to success, but is alive in the resistance of people who speak out.

This is the hope, through resistance, that Sharon Welch speaks of as the "dangerous memory" that undergirds a theology of hope and resistance.¹⁶⁹ She states that "the ability to hope in the face of continued defeat is grounded in both the method and the content of liberation theology." Through many experiences of resistance, perseverance and protest in our community, we have found the power of a hope that sustains people. Hope is that force or profound belief in what should be, that counteracts despair. A method of liberative ethics must help to recount this hope.

¹⁶⁷ Luke 19: 11 - 27. See discussion of this passage in Part I, pp. 214 - 221.

¹⁶⁸ Dialogue 18, May 25, 1995.

¹⁶⁹ Welch, Sharon, A Feminist Ethic of Risk, op. cit., pp. 103 - 180.

Hope is understood as that which brings about change, that which is liberative in the sense of opening an individual or a community up to new understandings of what life might be and that which is the source of the energy that is needed to move forward.

The word hope continues to be at the core of all our discussions of meaning, transformation and engagements in the community. Many hours were spent on the title of our book. For a number of months it was to be called "Hope in the Struggle", but this did not seem to express adequately what we wished to convey. When we began to speak of what hope is, the title became evident. "Hope is the struggle" is for us a powerful expression of its meaning in our lives.

2. The Sources of Hope - Connection to Concrete Experience

The source of the hope that undergirds our community's tenacity in the struggle, is in experiences, both remembered and present, of work, empowerment, worship and engagement.

(i.) Work: The title of the book's chapter on Work, "Is Work a Source or Destroyer of Hope", raises a fundamental question. Through stories of our own experiences of work and the effect work had on our parents¹⁷⁰, we concluded that working class people think of work as a means to survive. Although having work that will provide sufficient revenue to provide for yourself and your family is valued highly, there

¹⁷⁰ Part I, pp. 125 - 140.

is no expectation that such work in itself, would give meaning, purpose or value in life. As Elizabeth said, "I never found enjoyment in work and I didn't expect to. That's not how I was brought up. You go out to work and do it!"¹⁷¹ She spoke of being constantly exhausted during her years of cleaning offices at night and caring for the children during the day;

But the reason I did it was because I wanted to be home with the children during the day. I had them and I wanted to take care of them. So I went out during the night so my husband could be home with them at night while I was out cleaning. I was exhausted when I came home and I had to be up early with the kids every day. But I still felt that wasn't me. There was something better in life for me. There had to be. I didn't want to end up, like my mother did, with 35 years of cleaning offices.¹⁷²

Through our work in community organizations, our attitudes have changed towards work. We realized that when work did become something that brought dignity and meaning in one's life, we no longer looked on it as "work". We spoke of the way in which the work we are all involved in brings hope, because we have chosen to work differently and in activities that are of value to the community. This does not have to be waged work and in fact, for most people in our community, it is more often non-salaried work that is of value and a source of hope.

Elizabeth spoke of how work in the community had changed

¹⁷¹ Dialogue 4, March 10, 1994.

¹⁷² Part I, p. 125.

her and brought her new confidence in herself, but that it was not tied to salary;

Now that I've been working, I'm not the same. At Westmount Park School they call me a Teacher's Aid, but that's a phoney title. I'm not there for the teacher, I'm there for the kids. I am braver, and that's because of you. So I've told the teacher I'm not there just for her. Ten years ago I would not have done that. I have more confidence in myself than I have ever had and I have really changed.

Even when I was working for P.A.C.E. and wasn't getting paid, I felt good about myself... I just see there is a need and I like to be able to contribute something for others. P.A.C.E. is important in the community now definitely... It is a part of me and has brought my life real meaning. The hope is always there and God is the hope.¹⁷³

The definition of work is a determining factor in whether work is found to be a source of hope. Dorothee Soëlle says in her book To Work and To Love¹⁷⁴, that there can be no joy in our lives without joy in work. She has an expectation of work that differs from that of working-class people. Although her writings provoked very good discussion, the women were very discouraged by the gap between what she was proposing as a vision of work and the reality of work as a means of survival. Melissa commented that

there are centuries of people who do jobs that they are not enjoying, but they are getting some fulfilment because they are bringing home the pay check or feeding their families. People are not usually able to express themselves in their work.

¹⁷³ Part I, pp. 193 - 194.

¹⁷⁴ Soëlle, Dorothee with Shirley A. Cloyes, To Work and To Love - a theology of creation, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984.

They are a machine that works for their company.¹⁷⁵

In a broader definition of work, which includes work such as volunteering in the community or caring for children in the home, there is the possibility of finding meaning, self-worth and hope. As increasing numbers of people face long-term unemployment, it is vital that we find ways to value unpaid work and name the hope that people find in such involvements. Ralph Helstein, the president emeritus of United Packinghouse Workers of America, addresses this concern;

Learning is work. Caring for children is work. Community action is work. Once we accept the concept of work as something meaningful - not just as the source of a buck - you don't have to worry about finding enough jobs.¹⁷⁶

This is the thesis underlying the work of Marilyn Waring, which has had a powerful impact on the thinking of many women in our community and will be discussed further.

(ii) **Empowerment of Women:** Experiences of women's empowerment have been a profound source of hope for individual women and for the community at large. The initial step in women moving forward has often been an enlarging of their vision of what is possible. Sometimes the idea of what one can do is not very far beyond what we have seen in our families and in the Women's Discussion Group we seek ways to expand our horizons.

¹⁷⁵ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 17, April 30, 1995.

¹⁷⁶ Kammer, Charles L., Ethics and Liberation, Orbis, New York, 1991, p. 161.

The experience of one woman stands out, in understanding the hope that can be kindled within and lead to major life changes. She spoke of her experience during the Women's Discussion Group discussion about the changes that had come about as a result of their participation in the group.

For me, the group brought me out because I never went out before. My goal when I first started was to get off valium and I succeeded in that. It has been six years since I used it. I made it as a goal one meeting and I started that week. I did it kind of silly because you are supposed to wean yourself off and I just dropped it. Since then I haven't taken anything - which is good. I was able to talk about a lot of the problems I had in my marriages and a lot of things that have gone on. It helped me a lot. The next thing I got involved in was worship. Then I was a supervisor for the children in the Lunch Program. I volunteered in Hand in Hand as well. The big thing was getting out, getting off valium and not being dependent on it any more. I am out instead of being home crying all the time. That is what the group has done for me.¹⁷⁷

Through her participation in the Women's Discussion Group and then the Worship Group, this woman started to address the deep hurts and fears that had constrained her so seriously. This eventually led to her readiness to accept a part-time job supervising children for 1 1/2 hours a day. With this work, she was able to begin to believe that she had skills to offer and she was ready to take up the challenge to work as a volunteer with intellectually challenged adults.

Those around her saw a woman who was finally stretching her wings and over a period of many years, learning to fly.

¹⁷⁷ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 7, June 2, 1994.

We saw this process of change as beginning with the stirring of hope within her that she could conquer her dependency and eventually break through the fears that kept her entrapped in her home. The accompaniment along this path enabled this hope to flourish and those of us who walked with her found our hope renewed in the power of women to overcome such restrictions through involvement in community. The naming of this transformation and the seeds from which it grew, is the awareness of the presence of hope.

(iii) **Worship and Biblical Reflection:** In writing about her experience in Mexico, Donna connected what she heard about Liberation Theology, with our Worship Group back home:

Liberation Theology - the more I heard about it, the more I realized it is something like back home. When I first started going to the Worship Group at St. Columba House, God was distant, someone all-powerful and infinite. Me - a sinner, lucky if God took pity on me and never feeling like I'm good enough to go to heaven. With each meeting God became more reachable. The distance began to disappear. God is with me in my struggles.¹⁷⁸

This profound understanding of the presence of God in the day by day work of our struggle for liberation, is hope. Through biblical reflection and sharing, we seek out the source of this hope in our everyday engagements and relate our struggles to those of the most marginalized in scripture stories. Such discussions often bring us in opposition to traditional understandings of the text and there are passages that we believe contradict our understanding of liberation and

¹⁷⁸ Part I, p. 168.

justice. Participants are encouraged to trust their own interpretations that arise from reflections on their collective experience and they have had the courage to reject the authority of scripture that would sustain ongoing oppression.¹⁷⁹ This freedom and the growing confidence in their own ability to discern the presence of God with them, has deepened their faith and heightened their ability to discern hope in the darkest of times.

The biblical story of the bent-over woman¹⁸⁰ is a manifestation of what we have observed with women such as the one previously discussed in this chapter, who was helped to break out from the isolation of her home through participation in the Women's Discussion Group and the Worship Group. Hope is the intimate presence of God through the accompaniment by others over the years. Myrna does not see the healing of the bent-over woman as "a miracle passage in the sense of Jesus saying, 'woman, you are free' and all of a sudden she is healed... The struggle would continue because she would have

¹⁷⁹ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz holds a similar position and in her discussion of the relationship of the praxis of liberation theology to scripture, she states that "Hispanic women's experience and their struggle for survival are sources of Mujerista theology... and only those parts of the Bible which allow and enable a true liberative understanding of Hispanic women are accepted as revealed truth". Thistelthwaite, S. B. & Engels, M. P., editors; Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside, Harper & Row, 1990, p. 262.

¹⁸⁰ Luke 13: 10 - 17. See discussion in Part I, pp. 89 - 93.

to go on living with whatever that burden was."¹⁸¹ Elizabeth went on to say that the freedom comes in helping each other to stand up straight. This is the hope - for those who stand up, and for those who witness this healing.

Providing opportunities within the larger community to speak of the connections between their actions and their faith, has had a powerful impact.¹⁸² People have spoken openly of the despair all around them, but this despair is overcome by the hope that they find in the resistance of the people and the determination to build a caring community. These experiences have been important affirmations for the Worship Group of the validity of a liberative theology that strikes a deep chord within our community. The words of Beverly Harrison on those whose testimonies and visions have been denied or not heard by dominant Christianity seem very relevant. In her article, "Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation", she writes:

From the voices of those long silenced, we can conclude that today Christian hope at least means this: that we are given the power to sustain the struggle, to resist oppression, even when the empirical horizon for human hope is dim and remote, as it surely is now.¹⁸³

The making of the banner and the powerful images of the engagement of many groups in our centre, has been an ongoing

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁸² See descriptions of community worship at Easter in Christmas in Part I, pp. 119 - 121.

¹⁸³ Harrison, op. cit., p. 262.

source of hope. The presence of this symbol is the constant reminder of the interweaving of our common struggles as the presence of God with us in the struggle. People recognize themselves and their work, within the cross.

The banner has also provided a visual way to convey the liberative message of God to those outside our community. Participants in the Worship Group are becoming more confident through sharing their theology with ministry students and congregations. It is a challenge to find ways to convey their message across class boundaries, but they persist in this work out of the profound conviction that the voices of marginalized people can invite others to new understandings of hope.

(iv) **Engagement and Actions:** The hope that arises out of the community's actions is the specific subject of Chapter three of the book and focuses on three specific groups, namely, the Point Adult Centre for Education, the Women's Discussion Group and the Point At Work co-operative. In addition, the work of many other groups whose activities have contributed to building a caring community is recognized.

The Point Adult Centre for Education, now in its eleventh year of operation, provides a good example of how community engagement has been seen as a source of hope. A story from the very beginnings of P.A.C.E. illustrates the change and new perception of one's capability that can come from an education centre that is run by and accountable to the community. Elizabeth describes the older woman who, responding to a need

for someone to help clean and set up the centre, said with great pride; "If I can learn to use the computer, I can do anything!"¹⁸⁴ Many people, who had a history of failure in school, have found that they are able to learn in a supportive environment and others have found the opportunity to share their skills through teaching courses in sewing, aerobics, carpentry, drawing, calligraphy and crafts at P.A.C.E. This has helped people to reclaim their capacity to learn, to teach and to share in the operation of a centre that endeavours to respond to their expressed needs.

It has been a long, hard struggle to start this centre and to keep it going. Hundreds of people in the community have mobilized in times of crises to defend their rights to education before a school board that has threatened to withdraw funding and has never supported the community ownership of this centre. People speak of the survival of P.A.C.E. as a symbol of hope. It attests to the determination of the community to fight for their right to education and the trust in themselves as capable of being responsible agents of change.

The Welfare Rights Committee is a group of welfare recipients that continue to give tangible form to the meaning of hope, as they persist in speaking out against continued cuts to social assistance and to denounce the injustices of a society that is becoming so dangerously divided between the

¹⁸⁴ Part I, p. 72.

haves and have-nots. Many people volunteer in the work and advocacy of this group, but the memory of Rolly and his years of commitment to the cause, stand out. At his funeral, we spoke of "the hope that he brought to so many people through his work against the dehumanising welfare system and how bound together we are as God's people in this work for social change".¹⁸⁵

3. The impact of reading external literature

Reading the work of Marilyn Waring¹⁸⁶ had a profound impact on the women of the collective. In spite of the unfamiliarity with the language of economic concepts, they identified through their own experience, with the devaluing and lack of recognition of women's work. At an experiential level this was not new, but to begin to understand how economic systems are structured to exclude much of women's work from the economy and at the same time profit from their labour, provided a framework of analysis to build on. It was like an "Aha!" experience, that speaks to what you know at a deep level and gives you words to express it.

Waring's statement that "the wealth of a nation is its children and the creators of that wealth have no economic

¹⁸⁵ Part I, p. 58.

¹⁸⁶ Waring, op. cit. See discussion of her book in Part I, pp. 86 - 91.

visibility for their work"¹⁸⁷ was a very powerful concept for the women. Her analysis was a validation of their own experience, as women who have had to struggle just to survive, even though they are working very long hours inside and outside the home.

We were encouraged to find that Waring's ideas reinforced how we felt about the system and our ideas about work. She raised a new awareness of the importance of the word "value", in terms of a person's worth as well as the monetary use of the word. This provoked ongoing discussions about the values of our community and the fact that what we valued was often not reflected in the socio-economic systems of our society.

The section on values was particularly important to Myrna who sought the connections between this concept and hope.

We took a lot of time talking about hope, but 'Value' is almost as important as hope - maybe just as important. I can't separate it because the value of a person's work, the value of women's work, the value that goes with people caring and sharing, goes with the hope. We always talked about hope and the important word it was for our hopes and dreams. Value is too and I had never realized that.¹⁸⁸

The impact on Myrna of reading this book was like a shift in world view, in the sense that a new way of understanding the world and women's position within it had opened up for her.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁸⁸ Part I, p. 151.

¹⁸⁹ "I'd like to sit here after reading this today and think if everyone rebelled, if all the women rebelled, what would happen to the world? But I am also asking the question,

This reading brought challenging new ideas, affirmed the innate wisdom from the women's own experience, presented a way of structuring their analysis within a broader framework and called us to further engagement in seeking solutions to the devaluing of women. This experience is one illustration of how reading external literature has been a source of hope, in the sense of our understanding of hope - which is about new visions, affirmation, and the power to change.

4. Writing the book - a source of Hope

The process of writing the book produced many changes in the collective's understanding of themselves, their work, their community and the connection of their actions to global strategies. We discovered new insights, not only through our discussions, but in rereading what had been said. In a discussion about the first draft of the book, we were surprised to discover a strong sense of hope in what had been one of the most discouraging sections to those involved in the

'How free am I?' I know I don't have 100% freedom, but is it because I block myself and don't want to go that extra step? Or am I not able to? Is society stopping it or am I doing it myself? I am going to look at that because I just felt that I have not gone far enough. This is a strange comparison, but I will make it anyway. We talk about how we do worship and now that things have changed, we can never go back. I think the same thing happened with this when I was reading this book. If I am not doing things that I want to do, why am I not doing them? Is it because I don't want to go ahead, or are there blocks stopping me? Is the system stopping me?" Myrna, Part I, p. 154.

Point At Work co-operative.¹⁹⁰

In a final session we shared with each other what had happened to us in the process of writing this book and the effects it has had on us. Some of the comments were:

- I feel important. There is pride.
- I feel more educated now. We are opening our eyes to things around us that we never thought about before.
- You made me see things about myself that I would never have thought about before.
- We are our own worse critics. I didn't think that what I did was all that important, but now I find that it is. -Now, the pages are all there and all of a sudden it is a real thing -like a living, breathing, thing - not just paper.
- It is a part of our lives. It is not just another book. -My worship group and my life is more together now. I feel like it has made a circle.
- I found that my family is educated more since I have been involved in the book... I am starting to talk about things in the building more and that is because of the book that I am doing that.
- I am not afraid to talk any more. I am talking out more here now than I ever thought I would. My heart used to pound when I was speaking, and it doesn't any more. The 2 years has helped.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Excerpts from the transcript of Dialogue 16, March 19, 1995.

Melissa; "the comment I put at the bottom after I read the write-up on P.A.W., was that I am feeling a little hopeful again."

Donna; "Really! I am feeling the opposite. It just felt heavy again."

Myrna; "For me Donna, I thought that there was so much hope in it. ...I have a hard time with what is happening, but I also saw that the hope is there and, as Melissa said, it comes out."

Melissa; "Actually, I felt good after. I felt that a lot had been talked out and I felt relieved. When you read it, I found that even though there were hard things, there were so many positive things in it - just being our own support group and being there for each other."

¹⁹¹ Excerpts from transcript of Dialogue 19, May 30, 1995.

I expressed how much I had learned from the other women through the process of writing the book as a collective. I heard them speak about what hope means in ways that were new for me. The persistence in trying to find the words to express this concrete, yet elusive concept, continued throughout our discussions and writing. Hope became the core of our search for meaning. Through our writing, our eyes have been opened to new insights about our work and struggle.¹⁹² The writing has been a challenge to articulate the prevalent values of our community and society, to strive to find the words that express the meaning of people's involvement in our community, their fears, their feelings and the hope that brings the energy to persevere. To see these words in print has been an affirmation that the women have something of value to share, that might be helpful to others. This is the hope that carries on.

5. Hope seen from the outside

During a discussion on hope, we observed that sometimes other people can see in an action or involvement, a hope that is not perceived by those involved. Melissa spoke of some of the encounters we had in Mexico;

I felt that they looked at us with hope that their co-operatives or women's group was going to be like ours, but I looked at ours hoping that ours would be like theirs! ...I could see it in their eyes

¹⁹² See the discussion on the changes we have seen through the writing of this book, in Part I, pp. 221 - 223.

that they were hoping they would get as strong as us. But they accomplished and fought so much more for things than we ever did as a group... If they set out to do something, they did it.¹⁹³

We were profoundly changed by the faith and hope that we found in the Women's Centre in downtown Mexico and the development work in the countryside. We were strengthened by our connections with other people who were struggling to improve their lives with so few resources.

The upholstery co-operative (P.A.W.) is a very creative project, but the group's inability to offer a service that is accessible to those who most need it in the community¹⁹⁴, has felt like a failure. However, as I accompany visitors from other countries, communities, and congregations who visit P.A.W., I hear how much of an impact their work has and I shared this input with the women.

All these groups that come to see you, go away with a tremendous amount of energy and hope. They see, as I do, what deep commitment it takes to hang in there year after year, determined to make a go of it for both yourselves and the community. I have been aware as I have worked with you over the years, how tough it has been and how discouraging it has been financially. The work is so physically demanding and we all have been surprised at how long it takes to learn all the skills needed, but you have done it. Your work is valuable, your commitment is really an act of faith, and for those who can see this, you are a sign of hope.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 2, February 3, 1994.

¹⁹⁴ See Part I, pp. 100 - 103.

¹⁹⁵ Part I, p. 106.

We have found encouragement and hope through encounters with other groups and communities engaged in social action and resistance. Such connections enable us to see our own work more clearly and can bring new energy through the hope that comes from finding other partners in the struggle. Writing a book has been a unique experience that has provided the opportunity for us to delve deeply into the source of hope within our community, but that step is now over. The book has brought a new opportunity as outside, middle class communities, who have been challenged by our community's praxis, wish to be engaged in dialogue with us. Such encounters are a source of hope for the future. Making connections with other communities of struggle will be a very important component of our ongoing work and will offer the means to be challenged to new understandings from beyond our own community life.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fruits of a Method of Feminist Liberative Ethics

As is evident from the preceding chapters and the book, "Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action", there has been significant learning and change in the women and groups involved in this project. The Women's Collective discussed the transformation we had observed, in order to have new insight that will help us to continue in the increasingly difficult work for social justice. For us, hope is at the core of our work and the meaning of our social engagement.

1. Hope as the Seed of Transformation

The book began with a discussion of hope and how we had each experienced it as the call to transformation in the small steps in our lives, that led us on to where we are now. Hope is seen as many things - the encouragement from someone who sees potential within you that is waiting to be tapped; the change that you see in someone else who has made a difficult, courageous step; the sense that you are engaged in a project or action that is bringing encouragement to others in the community; the surge of energy and confidence that comes from succeeding in one step in a community development project; the light, the glimmers of life as it should be, that change the power of darkness; the life force that you feel surging

through people in another country who continue to fight against enormous odds; the core of faith that has led and nourished people in their actions in biblical times, that is like a live connection to our struggle today¹⁹⁶; the vision that life was intended to be happy, rich and full, and that we have a part in assuring that this vision remains alive.

This is an embodied hope, that cannot be known in the abstract and yet has a dialectic nature that is both within and beyond.¹⁹⁷ This understanding of hope is rooted in the new understanding that "God is not 'up there' looking down, scratching his or her head... but that God is in the struggle and is trying to give some kind of support".¹⁹⁸ The embodiment of this hope has been discussed in Chapter Four, "Hope as Integral to the Methodology."

The term "transformative vision" is used by Carolyn Sharp to describe the undergirding vision of the women's stories she studied.¹⁹⁹ She states that

¹⁹⁶ See discussion of the Parable of the Gold Coins, Luke 19: 11-27, in Part I, p. 131 - 135.

¹⁹⁷ "It [hope] feels like it is right here, that you can touch it. But it's actually not. It is something very far away. But if it didn't feel so close, we wouldn't have it.", Part I, p.16.

¹⁹⁸ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 12, September 24, 1994. p. 12.

¹⁹⁹ Sharp, op. cit. In Chapter Five, "Listening Again: Discerning Elements of a Transformative Vision", pp. 225 - 260, she writes of the women who had participated in a series, called *Les jeudis de l'histoire des femmes*, in which forty-one women presented the stories of their lives and their struggles in public sessions over a period of three years.

their sense of what is normal and what is not, of how things should be and how they should no longer be, transcends their historical and political commitments; and indeed, specific historical and political commitments are a reflection of this broader vision²⁰⁰

I feel that this embodied and visionary concept is akin to what we have spoken of as hope. The elements of this vision are discerned through the manifestations of such qualities as self-worth, solidarity, women's speaking and dreaming.²⁰¹ The Women's Collective have identified hope as they have perceived its presence in their engagements and visions. It would be interesting to find, as another step, whether such a grid as Sharp's categories, would be helpful in furthering our understanding of hope.

Our book ended, as it began, with hope:

We have taken on a responsibility to try to change society, to stand up to violence and abuse, to create places where we and our neighbours can learn, to create good jobs that pay fair wages and are good for our community. In all this struggle we have found a hope that gives life meaning and that has been at the root of all that has helped to build our community. That hope is everything!²⁰²

The process of the engagement of the women themselves as moral

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 225.

²⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 225, 226. Sharp has developed categories to discuss the qualities of this transformative vision, which could be helpful in assessing the transformative power of what we name as hope. Her three categories are (1) dignity (which takes shape through self-worth, power and authority), (2) agency (expressed through audacity, solidarity and perseverance) and women's existence (which requires women's speaking, women's space and women's dreaming).

²⁰² See Part I, pp. 221, 222.

agents responsible for the clarification, analysis and description of their work for social transformation, is, in itself, a discovery and affirmation of hope.

2. Steps of Transformation

(i) Engagement

Change began with becoming part of a group committed to addressing the oppressive structures in order to bring about better conditions in our community. The story of each woman in the collective showed how significant it was to be brought into an action or activity, out of one's own needs, that can now be seen as the entry point into the long process of transformation.

It is only over time, and often after years of involvement, that one moves from changes in one's actions or attitudes, to what is similar to a conversion - a change in one's world view and the way the everyday happenings in the community are understood. Transformation involves a process of liberation, a freeing from the attitudes or self-perceptions that participate in the systems of oppression, to the place where one begins to see and believe in the possibility for alternatives that are life-giving for oneself and the community.

Out of such engagements, other opportunities have come, that have together brought about transformation. The commitment to be involved in the long process of writing a

book, opened us up to further change in a process that engaged us in telling our story, seeing our ongoing dialogues in print and reading outside literature.

As the members of the upholstery co-operative discussed how they had been changed by their years of working on the project, Melissa spoke of her new sense of confidence and ability to make decisions. She said, "I think of my job as having control, not over people, but over what is happening. I feel responsible for myself and my own actions."²⁰³ This was shared by the other women in the group, who expressed their growing sense of autonomy, that had profoundly affected their relationships with family and friends as well. In spite of the financial instability of their work, they have taken time to become increasingly involved as volunteers in the work for social change in our community and are willing to assume leadership roles with confidence.

Through reflection on our experiences, both personally and as members of different groups, we have focused on the question of what brings about transformation. This intentionality has enriched our perception and awareness of the transformative power of engagement. Such discussions take a circular form, whereby the articulation of a concept will be expressed with reference to past experience.

Experience and engagement is the rich soil from which

²⁰³ Dialogue 8, May 31, 1994, p. 9.

transformation emerges if it is given the air to breathe and reflect, if it is watered by the rivers of long historical memory and if the warmth of community brings energy like the sun to carry on in the darkest times.

(ii) Story-telling

The telling of our stories is an integral part of the process of collective and personal transformation. "Hearing to speech" is a powerful starting point that Nelle Morton says is more than acute listening, and is a reversal of the usual logic that one attempts to speak precisely so that accurate hearing may take place. She speaks of this reversal as "revolutionary and profoundly theological. Hearing of this sort is equivalent to empowerment."²⁰⁴

Story-telling in the Women's Group and in the sharing by the Women's Collective, has often been of this nature - the story taking on new meaning because it has been voiced among women who are ready to hear the unspoken message - and has often been a moment of transformation.

Story-telling becomes a vehicle of liberation as it is reflected upon and understood in the larger context of the injustices experienced by women and those who are impoverished. The transformative power of the story was seen in the "listening" of the Women's Group to the degrading

²⁰⁴ Morton, Nelle, The Journey is Home, Beacon Press, Boston, 1985, pp. 127, 128.

experience of a woman who was sexually abused by a local doctor, the subsequent collective sharing of the responsibility for action and the experience of liberation as the silence was broken in the confrontation with the director of the medical clinic.²⁰⁵ As this story of resistance continues to be told, it is a recounting of the transformation that took place, moving from an experience of powerlessness to taking control and demanding respect. The power of the story carries on.

New understanding of the political nature of the personal stories of the Women's Collective emerged from telling the stories of our working-class families, reflecting on the impact their concept of work had on us and the broader implications of the undervaluing of women's work in the economy.²⁰⁶ Further study of the gendered nature of work and

²⁰⁵ Part I, pp. 82, 83.

²⁰⁶ My reflections after Dialogue 3, February 18, 1994, focus on the process of change I observed:
"It seemed as though we were opening up new territory that had not really been explored or completely recognized for what it was.

They were involved in claiming experience, understanding the source of change in their lives that had come through different people or groups. I am struck with how far they have come, particularly Elizabeth's story. She has moved from muteness to being an articulate woman who is more and more in touch with what she is doing. I am seeing a "liberative ethic" at work here, right in the process of dialogue and exchange. It is both speaking about their past and how they have been challenged and opened up, but at the same time, it is the very speaking together now, that is pushing a deeper level of understanding and claiming their movement. They are questioning the "whys?" of their lives in new ways. They are also speaking of the inherent value of their work, what they are giving, accomplishing and teaching." (p. 10)

the economy, led us back to re-evaluate the place of women's work within our community and in our homes. This circular, transformative process began and continues with the telling of our stories.²⁰⁷

The stories of the painful remembrance as an adolescent aware of the stigma of coming from an impoverished family, the fears of not knowing how to act or speak appropriately at concerts or theatres, the discussion of the distinct nature of our working-class community and the awareness of the different lens of interpretation we bring to biblical reflection, have led us to discuss issues of class and cultural differences. The stories have helped in the claiming and celebrating of this difference as a gift that privileges our understanding of the real world and this is a very significant point of transformation.

Such discussions have also underlined the wide chasm that exists between classes and the need for the voices of the

²⁰⁷ Sharon Welch discusses Mary Daly's writings on "the interaction of personal and political liberation in the experience of sisterhood. As women share stories of their own lives, a common experience of oppression and of resistance is recognized. This politicizing gives women the courage to persist in resistance, recognizing that their difficulties have not only an individual basis but a social and political basis as well." Welch, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity, op. cit., p. 41.

We have repeatedly experienced this connection between the personal and political nature of our stories. However, I believe that this does not just happen, but requires an intentionality to seek out the political implications of one's personal experiences.

working-class to be heard in the formulation of theology, feminist theory and ethics. Isasi-Diaz writes²⁰⁸ of the risks of blacks and Hispanics to be subverted, unheard, co-opted or trivialized by white women who do not comprehend the significance of their words. She speaks of the fact that Hispanic women's values are never good enough for Anglo women to adopt for themselves and says; "We are invited to participate, to share, but never to help define."²⁰⁹

This raises a similar challenge from a class perspective. Will the stories and analysis of working-class women have an impact on middle-class women? Will a methodology of feminist liberative ethics, centred on working-class women's stories, experience and analysis, be seen as no more than a particularity of experience that will not fundamentally change the way others engage in feminist ethics?

The connection between our own stories and the biblical stories has become a powerful locus of transformation. The biblical texts are liberated from their patriarchal power as they are lifted up to the light of women's experience of ongoing resistance against injustice, as authoritative. Mary Pellauer speaks of this transformative power of story in theology:

If there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories - listening to them and honoring and cherishing them to become even

²⁰⁸ The Mud Flower Collective, op. cit., pp. 68 - 72.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 70.

more brightly beautiful than they already are.²¹⁰

This has been our experience in developing a liberative theology that undergirds a methodology of feminist liberative ethics. In addition, our present experience is enlightened by the power of the biblical story that emerges when one's ears are open to the undercurrent of God's good news to the marginalized.

Story-telling has also been a powerful way to connect with the history of a working-class community. On a recent mobilization to mark the International Day for the Eradication of Extreme Poverty, hundreds of people marched in silence from St. Columba House to a community centre in the neighbouring impoverished community of Little Burgundy. Along the way, we stopped at the bridge over the Lachine Canal to hear the story of the six thousand immigrants, predominantly from Ireland, who died in fever shacks along the canal and the hundreds of workers who died in the construction of the canal and the Victoria Bridge. Later in the evening, the stories of the present suffering and exploitation of workers and the unemployed were grounded in the memory of the history of their ancestors.

This is the "dangerous memory" that Welch lifts up as a fundamental ingredient of resistance. She points out that "dangerous memory has two dimensions, that of hope and that of

²¹⁰ Mud Flower Collective, op. cit., p. 134.

suffering".²¹¹ The recounting of the histories of oppression both challenge the dominant reading of history and can motivate the ongoing struggle against institutions or structures within society that perpetuate such suffering.

The power of the story to remember, to release, to reveal, to proclaim, to call forth and to challenge, is a transformative power that must be recognized in a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

(iii) Seeing One's Words in Print

In the process we used in the writing of the book, the transcript of each discussion was read by the women in the collective, in preparation for the following session. The reading of these words and the write-ups on different topics that were produced as we progressed, had a powerful impact.

Although I had proposed this process to enable our collective work through building on prior dialogues and to assure shared accountability for each step in the writing, I was unprepared for the significance that seeing their own words in print would have for the women.²¹² Reading these

²¹¹ Welch, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity, op. cit., p. 36.

²¹² Myrna was particularly affected by the printed words and she commented; "It was that section, on hope, that I talked about being important when I reread what we said. As much as we talk about the hope and what it means for each other, it was reading it over after, that made it that much stronger." Dialogue 3, p. 1. Two weeks later, she opened the discussion with the following words; "Sometimes we don't realize what we are doing and how far we have come... From

words seemed to give a credibility and an authority to their own voices. The printed word reinforced their ideas and led to further mulling over of these thoughts during the intervening weeks and an affirmation of their own self-worth or impact within the community.

The written dialogue often became the springboard for further ethical reflection and clarification of how one felt about a controversial topic. The women felt accountable to their own written words and were challenged to continue to develop or change their position.²¹³ One's thoughts in print seem far more authoritative and final. The reading of these words was an important step of transformation.

The impact of their own written words was very evident after the session with P.A.W., the upholstery co-operative. As previously discussed, we had all left this discussion

reading this and last week's comments, and thinking about it, it really reinforces that I have come a long way. Who sits down and thinks about that, really? I don't mean that I don't think I'm worthwhile, but we don't stop to think about it. It really made it feel like yes, I'm somebody and I have done something."

²¹³ During one of the recurrent discussions on the ethical questions that are raised about the purchase of stolen goods, Donna returned to a prior discussion saying, "After reading it again I find it very distressful that... people are in a situation like that, so that they feel it [buying stolen goods] is the only way they can make ends meet. (Dialogue 14, p. 6)

As the discussion went on, Elizabeth brought her own words back into the argument, saying; "On p. 6, I said that it is like walking into a store and stealing something. Then Myrna yelled at me and said that it wasn't. But to me it is. But it is a hard decision... My kids did without so many things." (p. 7)

feeling that the project had failed in its goals and that the future was uncertain. However, in reading the write-up of this dialogue, we were able to sift the wheat from the chaff and see how the process of discussion had subsequently led to some changes and more realistic expectations. Reading the material helped the women to discern more clearly how they saw hope as such an integral part of this difficult struggle. Their own written words became a part of the liberative process that carried them forward.

Seeing their own words in written form, has had, in itself, transformative power for the women of the collective and is a significant element to be considered in a liberative methodology.

(iv) Reading Other Feminist Literature

The impact of reading outside literature was intimately connected to the women's engagement in community work and the process of change that was evolving from biweekly discussions, story-telling and years of experience in critical theological reflection in the Worship Group. Before we looked to outside literature to further our analysis and understanding, the women had become more confident in their own capacity to reflect on their experience from a feminist, socialist, class perspective.

Reading outside literature brought the women in contact with the writings of intellectuals in the fields of theology,

ethics, economy and feminist theory. This was a new and challenging experience, that required a high level of commitment to persevere with unfamiliar language.

Their experience became the lightning rod that brought together their innate knowledge and a more systemic analysis of their concerns. In opening the discussion of the article "Two Hands for the Clock"²¹⁴, on the gendered division of labour in the home, Elizabeth made the connections immediately with her own home situation. We were surprised that this seemed to be a new revelation for her, in spite of so many discussions on the inequitable work-load women carry. She responded that "it was reading it, I guess, and seeing it right here that someone else had that problem too. It really made a difference!"²¹⁵ The reading was a step of transformation for Elizabeth, whose eyes were opened to a situation that she had not been ready to look at, and she was empowered to act on this new insight.²¹⁶

The discussion of the article from "Monday Morality"²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Luxton, op. cit.

²¹⁵ Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 9, June 28, 1994, p. 8.

²¹⁶ A year later, as we talked about the changes that had come from writing the book together, Elizabeth commented; "It has made a difference in my family too. I don't touch dishes hardly at all now. (great cheers and clapping!) I know that you never thought I would say that."

²¹⁷ Wakin, Edward, Monday Morality - Right and Wrong in Daily Life, Paulist Press, New York, 1980

led to a heightened identification as working-class women who, though burdened with the constant struggle to survive, had a strength and fundamental responsibility for their family's well-being, that did not seem to be apparent in the lives of the middle-class women interviewed. This reading was intuitively perceived as an outside perspective and this provided a base from which to articulate and claim the unique abilities of women in our community. This article also had a very strong impact on changing our ethical understanding of the very complicated issues involved in the purchasing of stolen goods.²¹⁸ This was another step of transformation that arose out of the reading of outside literature which was related to one's own experience and biblical reflection.

There was such strong evidence of the transformative power of reading outside literature as a challenge to consider new viewpoints from which to view the world²¹⁹, that would make this a significant factor in a liberative ethics methodology.

²¹⁸ Although there was still deep understanding and acceptance of why people felt they had no option but to buy stolen goods, one woman spoke of how the reading had changed her own outlook. "I would do it differently now. But a lot has changed in the last year. Our way of thinking and my way of seeing things now. It is like when we talked about reading the Bible. You can't live the way you lived before... I think that is what happened with this reading... I never saw it written down before... I think because it was written down and I read it and was taking it in, and then all the other things, like worship, came together." Dialogue 16, March 19, 1995, p. 6.

²¹⁹ See discussion on the importance of the word "value" that arose from reading Marilyn Waring's work, Part I, pp. 149-154.

(v) Encounter with Another Culture

The powerful impact of the visit to Mexico is seen in the reflections on this experience in Chapter Six of the book, "Hope from Global Neighbours"²²⁰ and the subsequent analysis of this encounter as a source of hope.

Through this experience, the women's understanding of their own impoverished community was changed. As they have expressed it, "their eyes were opened" to what was around them in new ways and their commitment to fight against poverty deepened. There was a new awareness of the broad base of organizations and co-operation in our own community in the fight for people's rights and better conditions.²²¹ This has brought new understanding of the interrelated nature of systems of injustice.

Although three of the women were part of the upholstery co-operative, they had not understood this structure as part

²²⁰ Part I, pp. 156 - 179.

²²¹ In a discussion on the impact of the Mexico experience back home, Myrna commented; when I was in Mexico and saw how they pulled together for every little thing, I knew that we did it here, but I did not see it as plainly as I did when I came back. I think I took it for granted because that is the community I live in and that is what happens here. I didn't realize how hard the people worked here making things happen. There, maybe because it was a different environment, you saw the heavy load someone was carrying in front of your eyes. Here the people did that, but we didn't visualize it as much. But when you came back and thought about the work people did here, it was the same. They work just as hard and they carry heavy loads and burdens. It made me see it more - how hard the people struggle in this community and the organizations that we have to do the work together here." Excerpt from transcript of Dialogue 19, May 30, 1995, p. 6

of a broader co-operative development movement. This new awareness changed their attitude to their own work.²²² While we were in Mexico, four of us wrote the bylaws for P.A.W., which included the commitment to use any profits from the project as seed money to start another co-operative. The impact of the co-operatives we visited in Ixmiquilpan are clearly evident in this document.

The discussion with the Canadian Ambassador in Mexico proved to be another step in the process of understanding a global economy that is building its wealth on the backs of the poor. What they had witnessed in Mexico and what they knew from their experience back home, did not fit with the discourse of their ambassador and they gained confidence in their ability to discern such fundamental discrepancies. Discussions with the Mexican worker's union helped to consolidate this analysis and to heighten the sense of solidarity between the impoverished people of Mexico and their own community.²²³

²²² Melissa commented on the change in her own attitude as a result of the meetings with co-operatives in Mexico; "I worked in the co-operative downstairs before and it was just a job. It was learning to work in the co-operative, but I never felt the sense or feeling of what it is like to be part of a co-operative until I came back." Ibid., p. 8.

²²³ The meeting with the FAT (*Fondaciones Autonomnes de Trabajadores*) "helped us pull together what we had seen of worker co-operatives, women's struggles, health concerns, workers' rights and the effect of global economic forces on all our work. We saw how they too were affected by the Free Trade Agreement, by the policies of big international corporations and governments that were directed by economic growth policies rather than the good of the people." Part I,

Visiting other communities often requires speaking of one's own experience and this became a part of a process of learning to articulate the purpose of one's work and the conditions of our own community. Myrna experienced a very powerful moment of transformation as she spoke on behalf of our whole group before a gathering of hundreds of people who were part of base communities. She spoke with a confidence and simplicity that was very powerful. This has been a touchstone for her, as she has recognized her gift and call to share, both within and outside the community, the liberative faith that arises out of the struggle for justice.

The encounter with another culture has been the source of many steps of transformation that have led to concrete changes in our work, a broader analysis of unjust systems and the interconnectedness globally and regionally, and a fundamental change in world view that has profound, lasting implications. This encounter has been a liberative experience that is integral in a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

(vi) The Collective Writing of a Book

Writing the book Hope is the Struggle - A Community in Action, was a very challenging process that has changed us all profoundly. Our stories and experiences became the basis of the development of the collective's capacity to engage in ethical/theological reflection. This immersed us in a process

p. 171.

that began from the locus of our engagement and through storytelling, group discussions, reading our words, reading other literature and an encounter with another culture, we shaped a book that we hoped would strengthen our community struggle, build ties with other impoverished communities and bring new insights to those outside.

The sense of self-worth, the validation of the significance of one's contribution to the community, the ability to communicate the meaning in one's work, the sense of being more educated, an increased self-awareness and the development of skills in ethical and theological reflection are some of the personal experiences of transformation that have come through the writing of this book.²²⁴

The writing of the book has produced changes in some of the programs, organizations and projects in which we are involved. The effect on the upholstery project of the process of reflection, reading the discussion, the connections to cooperatives in Mexico and the subsequent discernment of the meaning and purpose of their work, has been very important to

²²⁴ I noted in my own reflections following our week-end discussions, Sept. 25, 1994; "I am finding that the method has exceeded my expectations in terms of how the women are developing in their role as reflectors and advancing in their capacity to engage in ethical reflection. The change over the past 8 months has been very noticeable. How do they perceive it is changing them (or not changing, if that is the case)? That is another step of reflection and I must be certain I don't bypass this through my own reflections on what is happening." I also commented on how significant their insights were in bringing new understanding in the relationship of class to values.

their ongoing work. Increased awareness of the systemic nature of women's oppression has led to the development of a new sub-committee of the Women's Discussion Group to engage the community on issues of violence against women. The Worship Group has been strengthened in their liberative theological reflections through increased awareness of the interconnections of all our work and this has led to a new sense of responsibility in sharing with outside faith communities. The four women from the collective who are members of the P.A.C.E. committee have integrated a broader vision of the resistance against oppression into their objectives and have begun a Popular Education program that will enhance all of the courses and activities of the centre.

These examples are some of the more visible indications of the transformative force of the process of writing this book. The effect on the community at large will take more time to discern and this will be an ongoing question for us. Some people in the community commented on their feeling of pride in seeing their stories in print and actually knowing people from their community who wrote a book . There are some more subtle changes I have observed, such as the 1996 Annual Report of the Welfare Rights Committee that concluded the analysis of their year's work, in speaking of their sense of "hope in the struggle". I believe that this visionary statement has arisen out of a new language that is being used in our community, that is connected to the writing of the book and the

leadership of the Worship Group.

The writing of the book has also been a means to identify the need for change in other areas. The role of the church in the community was discussed with a sense of heavy sadness that people are not being helped to integrate the struggles of their daily lives with their faith. The Worship Group will continue to seek creative ways to encourage people to articulate their faith and sources of hope, but their role is limited. They have expressed deep concerns about how isolated each family is in finding the way to transmit the values and beliefs that are important to them to their children. We have identified the need to initiate discussion with the churches in our area and we hope that the book can be a stimulus for further reflection.

The elements that comprised the process of writing the book have been amply discussed, but conceivably the most significant factor in the transformative power of this project lies in the spiral nature of the method. This can be more readily understood through using an example of the intertwining of the steps of transformation, such as the consideration of the ethical problems raised by the purchasing of stolen goods.

This concern arose out of discussions on the nature of work and thus the problems that face those who do not have paid employment. This led to sharing stories about their own experiences and how open such selling is on their streets.

This discussion was rooted in their own experience of struggling to survive and a fundamental empathy with all those who find themselves in such a position. However, the questions of how this differs from stealing and the effect it has on the development of their children's sense of right and wrong, were deep concerns.

The next step came in reading over what they had said, which had a strong effect and was the basis for further clarification and discussion. Issues of being judgemental of others, the desire to remain in solidarity with those who have few options and the analysis of a socio-economic system that seems to leave few alternatives for survival, were raised. We restated our beliefs and agreed to respect other opinions. However, we were left with a lack of clarity in how our rather ambiguous stance could offer any insight that could be conveyed to our children.

We decided to read some outside material on ethical decisions in daily life and returned to discuss our reactions to this material. This raised class issues and how unhelpful such writing was in considering the rightness or wrongness of an action if it is not contextualized and related to the struggle to survive. However, the definition of what one needs to survive varied greatly in the group and encouraged us to clarify what was "enough". What is materially enough and what is sufficient for children not to feel marginalized by their lack of resources in a consumer society, was an

unresolvable conflict.

The ethical questions this issue raised continued to be discussed in the Worship Group and insights from these reflections were introduced in the ongoing discussions of the Women's Collective. A new awareness of the personal and political nature of this issue developed. We identified the need to seek ways to discuss this topic openly in our community in order to raise the larger questions of both survival and fundamental values. This will be another step in the involvement of the community in ethical reflection out of our experience.

The writing of the book was the stimulus for this whole process and the steps of transformation in understanding and responsibility that occurred. However, there was yet another important step to be taken, in deciding how much of our discussion on this topic would be in the book. This required a weighing between the desire to present the significant ethical issues within the community, and respecting our solidarity and strong sense of accountability to our families and the community. The decision was finally made that, because this is an important issue in our community, it should be discussed in the book and identify poverty as the underlying cause that has led to this practise. However, out of a concern that outsiders may focus too readily on this topic, and that it could reinforce a negative image of the community, it was given relatively little space. It was also

decided that this would be the only place in the book in which we did not identify who was speaking.

This example has illustrated the interweaving of stories, discussion, clarification of values, outside analysis, worship and writing that have made this book a very transformative process. Engaging in this project as a collective of women has been its strength and ensuring that we would all be involved in the ethical and theological reflection on our experience, has been the distinctive quality of our collective writing.

3. Assessment of Role of the Programs/Groups in Transformation

Although I do not propose to develop a grid of analysis to assess the role of the programs or groups in the work of transformation, it is important to evaluate in a qualitative sense, the ways in which the groups met, or did not meet this goal. I will consider each group in terms of the capacity to engender dignity and self-worth; to increase involvement in community action; to be a source of hope; to take power; to have an impact on the community; and to foster solidarity.

(i) The Point Adult Centre for Education

P.A.C.E. sees the development of participant's dignity and self-worth as an integral part of its mandate of providing popular education in our community . Those who have been involved in the development and management of this centre over the years have found a new sense of dignity as they have

claimed their right to education and have discovered that they are capable of being responsible for this centre. There are many courses in which the participants in the centre have moved from a prior conception of themselves as inept and lacking in the capacity to learn, to a new awareness of their own skills and potential. However, there are some courses in which teachers have used traditional educational methods that have not necessarily led to this new sense of self-worth. A recent assessment of this failure has led to the implementation of new criteria for teachers that will require the utilization of popular education methods and engagement in social action.

In the past year P.A.C.E. has gone through an important process of evaluation and self-critique. One concern has been the failure to engage as a serious partner in the community coalition and to encourage participants to participate in community struggles. Four of the women of the book collective are involved with P.A.C.E. as workers or volunteers and their input has kindled new strategies directed at increasing involvement in community action.

P.A.C.E. has been, and continues to be, a source of hope for the community. Its perseverance in the face of constant bureaucratic obstacles and the opportunity provided for the community to further their education in areas that address their daily needs and goals, have brought a strong sense of empowerment to many who have been involved.

The P.A.C.E. committee have taken power over anglophone adult education in our community and they have gained authority in the eyes of the community and the School Board. Local people, who have been encouraged to share their special skills through teaching at P.A.C.E., have found a new sense of dignity as they have discovered their capacity to help others learn.

P.A.C.E. has not engaged intentionally in developing solidarity links with other communities or countries. It is a place where inter-ethnic encounters are increasing and awareness of different cultural customs is growing. This is an area that has not been adequately addressed and needs to be developed further.

(ii) Women's Discussion Group

So many women have taken important steps in claiming their right to live with dignity because of their involvement in the Women's Discussion Group. Activities are geared to developing one's self-worth and this is one of the most significant results of this group. There is also a developing sense of community responsibility and the group has been involved in many individual actions and long-term projects to improve social conditions.

The Women's Discussion Group has been a source of hope for those who have found their voice and for those who have been enabled to take charge of their own lives in implementing changes that have been life-giving. Through social and

feminist analysis, women have been empowered to see their own impoverishment and oppression as women in a different light. This group has had a significant impact on the community through a variety of activities such as raising issues of violence against women through a community Declaration Against Violence and raising awareness of gender roles.

The participants in the group have not taken responsibility for the group itself and this has been a disappointment. For many of the women, the struggle to survive is such a burden that they look to the Women's Group as an oasis.

The Women's Discussion Group has had frequent encounters with women of other countries, has sought to make connections between other cultures and their own conditions as women, and has engaged in specific solidarity actions. The group has fostered solidarity with other women and other cultures through International Women's Day activities in which the community at large have been helped to relate to their struggles globally.

(iii) Point At Work

The women in this co-operative have developed in their skills as upholsterers and managers of their own business. The self-esteem and pride in their accomplishments has been a significant result of their years of commitment in this work. The fact that the women are in charge of their own business

and working conditions has been empowering. However, because of the difficulty of attaining financial stability and functioning in a competitive market economy, they are very aware of the outside forces beyond their control that affect their business and project goals.

Because this project is located in St. Columba House, the women are very aware of community activities and actions. They are disappointed that often they are unable to participate in actions because of their work in the co-operative and P.A.W. itself is not a source of increasing involvement in community action. Their own analysis is that the project has had little impact on the community at large.

The women of P.A.W. have made global connections with others involved in grassroots co-operatives and this has heightened their sense of solidarity with developing countries. The perseverance and long-term commitment in this precarious project has been a sign of hope for others who have visited or know of their work.

(iv) The Worship Group

The participants in the Worship Group have developed a new sense of self-worth as they have re-read the bible from the underside. They have found a liberative message that has brought dignity and self-respect. Discussions have both led to further involvement in community actions and a deepening understanding of the collective nature of the struggle for justice. Although the work of this group may lead to a new

understanding of the rootedness of our engagements in the community, it does not appear to directly increase involvement of people in community action.

The participants have been empowered as they have taken responsibility for their own interpretation of the bible and its implications in their lives. They have challenged the authority of interpretations that may silence them or keep oppressive systems in place. They have assumed new roles of authority in sharing their reflections with other faith communities and being ready to defend the collective nature of their understanding of faith. Their work is beginning to bear fruit in increasing the sense of solidarity of outside middle-class communities with our own. The participants in the Worship Group have developed a sense of solidarity with other cultures and countries, with a heightened awareness of our connectedness in the historical struggle for God's kin_dom on earth. Their reflections and sharing have been a source of hope within our own community and a challenge to a new understanding of hope for those outside.

I have not attempted to offer a comparative or quantitative assessment, but a general overview of the ways in which these groups have nourished the work of transformation and where this has not happened.

4. Emergent Issues

(i) The Cost of Participation

There was a cost to pay for involvement in the writing of the book and this must be considered in an evaluation of the method we employed. A very onerous commitment of time was required by women who were already carrying a very heavy workload in paid jobs, as volunteers and at home. There were occasions when the sessions and reading were too much of a burden, but knowing that this was both understood and was the same situation for everyone, gave the extra impetus to carry on. There was also a deep concern that the book would not get published, or even if it did, would not be of interest to others. There could be no guarantee of its usefulness and in some respect, it was trust in my judgement of the value of their input, that helped them take the leap of faith into the unknown territory of collective writing.

There has also been a cost involved in moving beyond where people in their family or the community perceive themselves to be. As Myrna once stated, "once your eyes are open, there is no going back". This can put you on a path that asks even more commitment from you and is not well understood by those not so involved, even very close family, friends and other workers.

The response of the community to the book has been a mixed one. There are people who have been delighted in reading excerpts and seeing the strengths of their community

lifted up, instead of the negative media coverage of impoverished communities that is so prevalent. But there are others who have been very upset that their community has been portrayed as "poor" and having very low educational levels. These comments have come from those whose children have succeeded in the business world or people who are not politicized in their understanding of the causes of long-term poverty. One family member has been deeply hurt by what he feels is a humiliating and denigrating portrayal of him and this has been very costly to the family. Another disappointment has come from friends and family who have not read the book. Our hope had been that these writings would be a source of hope and encouragement within the community, but we had failed to account sufficiently for the fact that the majority of community people do not read books at all.

We were fully aware of these risks and the potential cost. Nevertheless, it has required ongoing discussion to understand these responses, accept them and place them in the perspective of the overall effect of the book on ourselves and others.

(ii) Involvement of the Women's Collective in the Thesis

The Women's Collective gathered once again in order to discuss their reaction to this thesis, which three of the four women had read entirely. They spoke of feeling honoured that they were being consulted and expressed their appreciation of the respect that was shown for them. Myrna was very moved as

she said;

It was just so much stronger on paper, what you thought about us and the respect that you showed us... I couldn't believe that someone would feel that about me. It built up my ego and helped with my self-esteem. I feel fine about saying things I want to say, after reading that.²²⁵

It was said that the thesis made them feel important and that they learned a lot about what they themselves had written. It affirmed that they did have wisdom to share with others and they spoke of the fact that, even if they do not have a lot of education, they could see that they had wisdom and experiences from which others could learn. There were questions raised for clarification, but there were no areas of disagreement or suggestions for changes in the thesis.

Melissa was very interested in the first chapter which discussed other writings and a more theoretical analysis of the issues to be addressed. She expressed her surprise at how much was written that people in our community never know about and was very delighted to read about the book written by native women. Since the publication of our book, Melissa has been very disinterested in it and has not shared in the excitement or sense of self-esteem the other women have experienced. Her response to reading the thesis is very significant:

It is only now that I begin to feel the importance of the book. I don't think the book meant the same to me as it did to others. But it is only reading the thesis that I feel that our book is very

²²⁵ Excerpt from Dialogue 20, April 4, 1997, p. 1

important.²²⁶

I feel that it was the combination of her serious interest in the writings of others on feminist theological ethics and the situating of their own work within the search for deeper understanding of shared concerns, that brought this new appreciation of the book. Her response is very significant in developing methods that will be a means to empowerment for non-academic women.

There were expressions of regret that they had not participated more in the actual writing of the book, as I had pointed out in the thesis. However, when we discussed this further, they felt that the process had been quite overwhelming at times and they did not feel they were ready or able to do more.

The thesis raised many questions about their own need for more education. As Myrna said, "I would like to have more of the smarts and be well-educated. It is not that I think I am dumb now, but there is a lot that I wish I could do better."²²⁷ Reading the thesis heightened an awareness of the limitations they face and they began to question what possibilities may be open to them. We discussed the idea of starting a reading group in which we could select a book to read and discuss together. The thesis has provided the opportunity to seek further ways to continue the process of learning.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

Reading the thesis challenged Melissa to raise questions about her future;

I found that reading your thesis and doing the book and meeting with others, I question what I want to do from here on. I have struggles about where I am going and I see this as an encouragement. It is an encouragement, but also there are barriers too. That is always there. But there is more questioning of myself now and what I will be doing. I find myself asking that question more and more all the time now.²²⁸

Reading the thesis has provided another opening to continue the process of change and transformation.

For my part, the knowledge that the women would be reading my thesis had an impact upon what I have written. It forced me to be conscious of the use of "they" and to be clear when I should use "I" or "we". It was like carrying along the collective process and assuring that I did not distance myself from the experience and insights we had discovered in our work together.

5. Responding to Questions Raised in Chapter One

A number of the questions and challenges²²⁹ for a methodology of feminist liberative ethics, that arose from a study of some of the literature from the fields of Methodology, Liberation Theologies, Feminist Theory, Sociology and Ethics, have been discussed already in the course of this

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

²²⁹ See a list of these questions from Part II, pp. 257, 258.

thesis. There are three questions or areas of concern that remain to be addressed specifically.

(i) Has the method of feminist liberative ethics supported or encouraged resistance and liberation?

I have stated that a method that is liberative will be seen by those directly engaged in resistance to injustice and social action, to have supported their work. The clearest indication that this has in fact been the case, can be seen in the steps of transformation that have been observed by the participants themselves. The changes that have occurred have led, not only to the increased understanding of the web of connections that strengthen collective resistance, but have resulted in concrete steps to augment the involvement of others. This method has heightened the awareness of hope and a new understanding of its presence as the force that energizes those in the struggle. This naming has led others in the community to articulate this hope as that which gives meaning, even when there is little immediate success in holding back the oppressive forces that produce increasing poverty and divisions in society.

(ii) Has the method of feminist liberative ethics led to a transformation of social relations both in consciousness and in reality?

On a personal level, the discussions and readings have

led to significant changes in the women's understanding of gender roles they learned as children and the existing inequities within their present families. This has led, in some cases to specific changes in family relations.

The development of the women's confidence and sense of authority has led to very significant changes that have been observed as they have taken on new responsibilities and leadership roles. The requests and opportunities to engage in dialogue with outside faith communities have opened doors of possibility of new relationships and understanding between communities.

The encounter with another culture in Mexico and the articulation of the significance of this experience have led to bridges of understanding between these communities and a heightened awareness of the problems of racism in our society. The results have also been seen in a new awareness of poverty, the interconnectedness of the victims of the global economy and concrete changes that have been introduced in our programs as a result of this encounter.

(iii) Will the awareness of class issues in the book, lead to new understandings within feminist communities and openness to listen to these voices, or will it be more effective in building bridges with other marginalized communities?

An initial evaluation would indicate a heightened awareness of class identification on the part of the women in

the collective, but it is not yet clear whether this will lead to making more connections with other marginalized communities. Such communities, are unfortunately unlikely to be the places where our book will be read and this is a great disappointment.

We have heard from the input of middle-class women, that through reading and group discussion, our book has raised their awareness of class issues and challenged them to grapple with the implications of this knowledge. It is too early to assess what this will lead to or to evaluate the possibility of these voices affecting the doing of feminist ethics, theory and theology within the academia.

(iv) Does the method respond to the key elements of a liberation social ethics methodology as outlined by Beverly Harrison?²³⁰

In the course of this thesis, it has been shown that the method has responded to the initial seven criteria Harrison addresses, but it is necessary to discuss the last criteria she proposes. She speaks of the importance of the presence of a dimension of human liberation that is "the reconstructive phase of annunciation and celebration". Celebration is an integral part of our social action, as people recognize the need to celebrate the smallest victories or life events in the

²³⁰ A summary of the stages she has outlined is found in Part II, p. 250.

midst of so much pain. Although we have engaged in a liberative theology that has brought together the struggles of people's lives under oppression with the liberating news of the gospel, we have just begun to engage in what Harrison would call the reconstructive phase of theology that has an impact beyond the Worship Group. In the public worship we have led during the Community Lunch Program, we have explored ways to use the ordinary language and the experiences of the people to involve them in theological reflection. Rituals of empowerment have arisen from the Women's Group celebrations of the remembrance of the December 6, 1990 massacre of fourteen women. In the search to express the hope for liberation from violence, these have been profoundly spiritual events that have arisen from a secularized expression of faith. We have not focused on the much needed reconstructive phase of theology and this will be an ongoing challenge.

6. New Principles in a Methodology of Feminist Liberative Ethics

There is now wide recognition in feminist literature that the starting point of liberative ethics must be the context of engagement in the struggle against oppression²³¹ and must

²³¹ Sharon Welch provides a very thorough consideration of this principle as fundamental to liberation theologies, in her book Communities of Resistance and Solidarity. She states that "to speak of liberation is to speak out of the experience of being oppressed, of resisting, and of being liberated. To

of transformation that arises from the discernment of those within marginalized communities.

The new principles that are integral to such a methodology are: (i) Hope as an integral element in liberative ethics, (ii) the transformative power of the written word, (iii) reading from feminist literature as a liberative step, (iv) encounter with other cultures as a locus of transformation and (v) participation in the collective expression of the experience of transformation. These steps pose questions and challenges for ongoing work in feminist liberative ethics.

(i) Hope as an Integral Element in Liberative Ethics

Hope is central to a methodology of feminist liberative ethics. That which is liberative is tied to a vision of how things should or could be and this vision, which is grounded in the present, is embedded in the concrete work for transformation towards a more just future. The articulation of this hope has, in itself, been the generator of new hope. In marginalized communities, where the forces of oppression loom large and powerful, the presence of hope as the underlying force of transformation is fundamental.²³³

The significant difference and challenge this brings to liberative ethics, is the necessity of a subjective

²³³ The analysis of our experience that leads to this conclusion is fully developed in the chapter, "Hope as Integral to the Methodology", pp. 336 - 355.

understanding of the reason and source of this hope. This cannot come from a theoretical study, but requires the concrete involvement of the ethicist in communities of resistance in which such hope is not a choice, but a necessity.

(ii) The Transformative Power of the Written Word

Seeing their own words in written form, has had, in itself, transformative power for the women of the collective and is a significant element to be considered in a liberative methodology. Reading these words brought credibility and gave their voices authority. One's printed thoughts became the opening to an affirmation of the self and one's value in the community, that lead to further reflection and clarification.

Those for whom writing has been an integral part of their profession and life experience, may feel that this is self-evident and a traditional method used to communicate learning. However, what is new is not that this is simply a method of communication, but that the very process of reading one's own words is liberative, particularly for those who are not educationally privileged, and an accountability to these thoughts brings forth further change and understanding.

A recognition of the transformative power of the written word in liberative ethics, challenges ethicists to develop new methods of learning. Ethics must be seen as a process, not a discipline. This places a responsibility on the ethicist to

engage in ethical reflection with those whose reality is being studied, to develop flexible tools of analysis and to use language that will enable full participation of community people.

(iii) Reading from Feminist Literature as a Liberative Step

Reading outside literature can be liberative for women engaged in community work for social change and have prior experience in a process of ethical/theological reflection. Such readings can be a catalyst that provides an objective position from which to view one's own reflected experience and see more clearly the implications for new steps in the process of transformation.

Even when such material is identified as "outside" or class-biased, it provides a base from which to articulate and clarify the ethical issues within a community. The challenge of another stance from which to view the world, can be a liberative experience. The engaging of intellectual writing confirmed the women's own capacity to structure their ideas and relate to the thinking of other women from a different milieu who are concerned with similar issues. This can be a reaffirmation of the significance and value of their own work. The connections with other women's struggles is a broadening of the liberative process and adds to the transformative potential of feminist literature within a methodology of liberative ethics.

I would suggest that if more feminist writers were committed to be accountable to those in less privileged circumstances, their writing would be affected by this awareness and be more accessible to a broader base of women.

(iv) Encounter with Other Cultures as a Locus of Transformation

The encounter with another culture has been the source of many steps of transformation that have led to concrete changes in our work, a broader analysis of the connections between global and local issues, and a fundamental change in world view that has had profound implications. This encounter was a liberative experience that led to the development of a broader understanding of the struggle for justice and the links to other communities of resistance was a source of hope that brought new energy.

The development of a global understanding of systems of oppression and the hope that comes from partners in solidarity, are essential elements in a methodology of feminist liberative ethics.

This understanding brings new challenges to us to continue this process of encounter with other communities of resistance, to build bridges of understanding and to be open to being changed by the insights and experiences of others. Such encounters require a prior process of reflection within a community, the willingness and availability of people within

marginalized communities to take on another involvement, the leadership that will guide such a process and the funds to permit such exchanges.

The respect for the particularity and diversity of communities, is an important criteria of liberative ethics. A methodology of feminist liberative ethics must include the transformative potential of cross-cultural encounter in a process that defines difference and seeks solidarity in the common struggle against oppression.

(v) Participation in the Collective Expression of the Experience of Transformation

The collective participation of women in doing the ethical/theological reflection on their experience within a community, respects the authority of women to name their own experience and their capacity to develop the analytical skills that will empower them in their ongoing work for liberative social change. This process is in itself transformative and must be a key element in a liberative methodology.

The interweaving of stories, discussion, clarification of values, outside analysis, worship and writing, that were integral components of our method in writing a book collectively, has been a transformative process. Other groups have engaged in collective writing²³⁴ and have offered

²³⁴ The writing of the Mud Flower Collective (op. cit.) arose from the common experience of feminists engaged in theological education. The book Enough is Enough: Aboriginal

valuable insight into this method of ethical reflection. However, the distinctive quality of our collective writing, has been the engagement of women in an impoverished community in all stages of the ethical and theological reflection on their experience, and their ownership of the expression of this work in the production of their book.

Other means must be developed to respond to the differing needs within communities of resistance to participate in the collective expression of their experience of transformation. This will require a major shift in the approach of the academia engaged in liberative ethics, a willingness to offer their resources to communities for this work, to acknowledge their own class privilege and seek the means to address power inequities that perpetuate the dependence of working-class women on intellectuals for their voices to be heard.

The voices in the struggle must be heard! The mark of a methodology of feminist liberative ethics will be the extent to which these voices in the struggle will inform and challenge the methods feminists employ and will have a transformative impact on all liberative ethics.

Women Speak Out (op. cit.) is a powerful expression of women's stories and collective voice, but differs from our experience in that the gathering of information and the writing of the book was the work of the ethicist.

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