



## On the spirit of community psychology: One personal story

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I believe there is some value in thinking about how to create emotional and intellectual resources to anchor, enhance and evolve our spirit when doing the work of community psychology.

When beginning our careers our families, social networks, mentors and senior colleagues often are sources of strength, support and feedback that are fundamental for us to keep our spirits. When we begin our newly created professional roles, to make our way, it is largely up to us to create our own support systems to sustain our spirit. Our family and social networks, colleagues and students may be at our side but it is ourselves who are challenged to experience personally the places in which we work.

To the extent that being a community psychologist is a marginal activity within the larger profession of psychology there maybe fewer opportunities to receive validation and the respect we appreciate from colleagues. Creating personal resources for myself has been pivotal to my own efforts to maintain and enlarge my spirit.

These five people through their words and deeds helped me to continue on my search for what I believed was my emerging career. They inspired me to keep at it. They still do.

Personal resources and constraints within your own communities maybe quite different from mine. So, I am very pleased that there will be contemporary voices contributing to this discussion.

First, something of the context of my graduate education. When I was in graduate school at the University of Texas in the mid 1950's, most faculty, both explicitly and implicitly, communicated that the good and true psychologist did experiments and basic research and did not do applied investigations or work directly with citizens as equal participants. There were some notable exceptions like Ira Iscoe, Lou Moran and Wayne Holtzman who told me that a

psychologist did not need to restrict oneself to be only the detached observer. I COULD be accepted among psychologists when I worked directly with citizens as co investigators.

As I thought of myself as a different psychologist I did not begin this developmental process with much clarity or self-confidence. I had a silent angst that I would be perceived as incorrect, second-class, deviant or an embarrassment to my self or my former teachers.

This process of identifying personal resources became a life long expedition.

These five persons' writings and presence made a substantial impact on my spirit. They are a psychiatrist, anthropologist, psychologist, philosopher, and a poet.

I have had the very good fortune to meet some of these persons. Others I know only from their writings.

### **Erich Lindemann, Psychiatrist (1900-1974)**

In 1958 I began a post-doctoral fellowship with Erich Lindemann of Harvard Medical School. Ten years before he had created a multidisciplinary mental health clinic in the town of Wellesley Massachusetts which became a pioneering preventive service, fourteen years before the national community mental health movement. Both the model and Erich's own informal style and personality of being creative without being pompous and being a great listener and supportive person encouraged me to believe that I could develop a career as a psychologist working in the community.

The presence of active people from different professions in Wellesley and Boston excited me about the prospects of working collaboratively with

citizens. I was fortunate to have this watershed experience immediately after receiving the PhD.

Those two years were essential years for I discovered a new paradigm in public health with its preventive and community based traditions. My spirit was soaring. I found an intellectual home that was far beyond the niches of psychology at the time. It is not only Erich alone but also the settings he created in Wellesley and the Medical School that congealed my identity.

I was at the right place at the right time and had the rare privilege of being mentored by a creative and supportive person who encouraged me to create my own ideas.

30 years later in talking with his widow I learned of the political and personal costs he suffered within his medical and psychiatric community because of his steadfast values to work collaboratively with social scientists and citizens. At the time to do this was heresy. This knowledge endeared him even more.

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### **Ed Wellin, Anthropologist (1917-)**

In the spring of 1960, during the second post-doctoral year at the Harvard School of Public Health I enrolled in a course taught by the anthropologist Ben Paul (1911-2005). We read “ Water Boiling in a Peruvian Town” a report of a two-year research project by the anthropologist Ed Wellin published in 1955. Wellin presented a beautiful example of how it was necessary for Wellin and a rural hygiene worker to immerse themselves into the village to understand the complexities of the social fabric of this small community of 200 households. He wanted to understand why certain persons took the health-engendering step to boil water to lower the incidence of typhoid fever while others did not. Wellin was an active listener and intrepid participant in the cultures

of the smaller sub communities within this already small community.

One of his findings was that in this Peruvian town children were the most frequent water carriers from the nearest stream. Males and females of courtship age and married men did not carry water according to local norms and traditions. Wellin also learned that the acceptable times to boil water was after breakfast and after the noon meal; another ecological constraint.

I learned that, there was a complexity within small communities that could not be understood if one was pre-occupied with being an objective, detached, uninvolved scientist. Understanding class and heritage was learned AFTER respect from the various sub communities was obtained.

The improvised methods employed by Wellin were inspiring. He revealed the nascent quality of the town. My spirit was up lifted when I read about the insights of Wellin’s immersion and the processes of his building trust.

One of his major findings was that when stimulating an innovation in a community it is essential to create cordial and trusting personal relationships between the researcher and the community. This was essential! Today, this is a truism but back then it was a very provocative and even radical insight.

The significance of Wellin’s work was that although the efforts to have citizens boil water had limited success it was the elegant analysis of the villagers and their various contexts that helped explain the determinants of their behavior. Wellin grappled directly to understand the everyday issues of people.

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### **Roger Barker, Psychologist (1903-1990)**

Barker spent his entire career (1947-1972) documenting the social settings of a small Kansas town, Oskaloosa by name. What he did was document the places where the residents spent their lives. He discovered that places taken for granted and not thought about much were in fact the primary ways in which the town was a viable social system. Settings like "Household Auction Sale" and "High School Boys Basketball Game", "Restaurants & Diners", "Drugstores" & "Garages" defined the town. He and his colleagues' convictions and ingenuity to create methods to document these settings plus his unyielding courage to document places, not people alone, had an inspiring impact. I hoped that I too could move beyond the psychopathology of persons.

One of his later achievements was to conduct a comparative study of the public settings of Oskaloosa and a comparative town in North Yorkshire England ten years apart. One of the stimulating findings was that over the ten-year period Oskaloosa was expanding the number of settings for adolescents; Oskaloosa was more involved in generating activities for adolescents. In Yordale, in contrast, settings were found to be often on the streets and sidewalks. This type of analysis encouraged me to think about the qualities of settings and their influence on community life.

Barker was not one to publish discrete studies but waited until he had a grasp of the complexities of the town of then some 1,000 people. He lived in the town. No doubt he and his wife's presence as residents helped his research to be accepted and added to the clarity of his interpretations of the richness of the settings.

Barker's work was a compelling example of actually studying places and raising the then novel idea that not only qualities of individuals but qualities of places gave insights and knowledge not thought about before.

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Schoggen, P. (1989). *Behavior Settings*. Stanford California, Stanford University Press.

### Ludwig wittgenstein (1889-1951)

The writings of Wittgenstein were like finding a soul mate.

He had written a book in the trenches of World War I that was quickly revered by the newly forming logical positivists. Logical Positivists had much influence on psychology especially during the 1920's through 1950's. Their premise was that if a concept could not be empirically verified it did not exist.

As soon as Wittgenstein was going to be greeted as an intellectual leader for the group he rejected their tribute and refuted his earlier work. He then went on a constant journey throughout his life to develop another perspective that questioned his own prior work. The content of his ideas and his intellectual toughness, courage and conscience impressed me.

I also liked his way of living. He did not accept his part of the family fortune and was not enamored by professional philosophy. I liked the creative independence of his ideas and his spirit. A remark that he made when referring to someone who was notably generous or kind or honest was "He is a HUMAN being".

I noted that he could whistle long passages of music from Memory. I aspired to do that. He designed a house for his sister down to the doorknobs. I could not do that.

He believed that the meaning of concepts was due to the forms of life in which they were embedded. An ecological premise. He also believed that a result of philosophical thinking was: NOT a truth discovered but a confusion dissolved.

He was a fresh voice that encouraged my hope to create my own work and not be trapped by tradition or custom or the dominant paradigm. He fueled my hopes to continue on my own journey to break new ground. He became a favorite invisible uncle.

On my home page I have a Wittgenstein quote:

"We feel that even when all POSSIBLE scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched".

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Monk, R. (1990). *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, New York: The Free Press.

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## William Stafford (1914-1993)

When I was at the University of Oregon in the mid 1970's I went to a meeting of professors advocating more community involvement. The poet William Stafford was there. He did not speak except a few words at the very end when he wondered out loud if it was not also important to stay at home and be with family and kin. I was surprised. He then read a poem. After the meeting I told him that it was a wonderful poem. Could I have a copy? He handed me the handwritten lines as a gift. I was stunned. It was then that I began to learn about this Poet Laureate of Oregon who was on the faculty of Lewis and Clark College in Portland.

He was a conscientious objector during World War II. He wrote over fifteen books in his poetry career. He said "I think you create a good poem by revising your life."

I will read the first four lines of one of his poems: "A Ritual To Read To Each Other". It was included in his first published book of poems "West of Your City" in 1960 when he was 46 years old.

"If you don't know the kind of person I am and I don't know the kind of person you are a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home we may miss our star".

Those four lines anchored my search for a collaborative research style especially for the ten years of work with African American community leaders in Chicago in the 1990's. That poem affirmed my inchoate conviction to listen, learn and try to understand the concerns and hopes of these leaders. I was sustained by the commitment of the community leaders and retained in my memory Stafford's poem.

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## Conclusion

These five persons were mighty sources for my spirit.

Through their work, their persistence, their courage and their willingness to go beyond tradition inspired

my own efforts to set out in my own direction. They each were persons who made a big difference in how I thought and how I proceeded and how I then made my way.

They are specific of course to my being born and coming of age when I did. They helped me in my varied settings and in my travails to keep exploring my ideas and testing them when there was often small support for them until later in my career. Without these people and others like them it is uncertain if I could have continued my work with élan and if my spirit could have been buoyant enough to carry through what has become a most satisfying series of expeditions in community psychology.

I very much look forward to hear from others on your efforts to contain and enhance your own spirit for community psychology.