

IDENTITY

So, what did you do while you were recuperating from your second life-threatening experience in your adult life? (I had a near-fatal motorcycle accident in 1975.)

Now that I'm a few months beyond what happened, this is the question I pose to myself, or, in less flattering terms, obsess about. Frankly, you think about what you do and how that impacts on or factors in to what happened to you. Simply put, it caused to me to reflect on the decision I made to come to SMOC in the late fall of 1984. It brought to mind an experience that I want to share here, an experience that contributed significantly to my decision to accept the SMOC position.

In 1971, I entered a two-year graduate degree program in Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia. Graduate Social Work education consisted then, as it does now, of a combination of classwork and field experience. My first year field placement was at the Powhatan Child Study Center, an interdisciplinary team consisting of faculty and graduate students from VCU's Department of Education, Social Work, Public Health and the Medical College of Virginia. The Child Study Center served as a resource to the Powhatan School System.

Then, Powhatan was a rural farming community located approximately 35 miles west of Richmond, with dirt roads, large brick houses for the landowners, and tarpaper shacks with outhouses dotting the landscape. The Powhatan School System had just gone through integration three years before. The school system consisted of an elementary school, a middle school (prior to integration the African-American school) and a high school. The Child Study Center was set up to assist the county's educational system with the task of educating children who had always played together, but had never been allowed to go to school together.

One of the student unit's first assignments was to interview a community leader. Some of my colleagues chose the School Superintendent, business leader, the County Executive. I chose to interview the head of the local anti-poverty agency called POWCAP, which stood for the Powhatan Goochland Community Action Program. So, one real hot, airless early fall Virginia afternoon, I arrived at POWCAP's headquarters for my appointment. The agency was located in a small one-story whitewashed clapboard building with a screen door that didn't do a very good job of keeping out the flies. I introduced myself to the Director, an African-American woman who I judged to be in her late 30's or early 40's, and for the next two hours, talked with her about a broad range of things. She treated me, a young white kid whose life, outside of a recent military stint, had been spent in a northern, urban area, with the same respect that she showed an elderly black woman who arrived during the course of our conversation needing help with transportation to a doctor's office because her "sugar" was acting up.

More than three decades later, the POWCAP Director's name escapes me, but her quiet dignity and the content of our afternoon's discussion do not. She spoke to me of her hopes and dreams for her organization, the corrosive effect of poverty on children and family life, the scarcity of resources and the difficulty of getting resources in an isolated, rural setting. We spent a lot of time talking about integration and how the Great Society era had impacted race relations in the county. Poor blacks and whites in numbers fairly evenly divided comprised a large portion of the county's population. Her efforts to reach out to the African-American poor had been successful. Her attempts to engage poor whites had not. The poor white folk saw POWCAP as the "black agency." She wanted to move beyond that. She talked about how poverty caused the same problems no matter what your skin color was and her desire to find a way to get the poor of both races to work together. That would create a powerful force for change if she could make that happen.

I left the meeting enthused and appreciative, wrote up my notes, got a great grade and filed the experience in my memory where, frankly, it sat unattended only to re-emerge 13 years later when I was in the midst a job change deliberation. I chose to come to SMOC, an anti-poverty agency whose values and culture resonated with me.

I admit to questioning that decision, but never regretting it. During the winter of 2003, as I sat in front of a computer, playing a card game, continuing to get my strength back, when I found myself once again reflecting on the decision I had made 18 years previously, I remembered that Virginia afternoon and reaffirmed the life choice I had made, feeling a deep sense of appreciation for this seminal experience that had gone into it.

James T. Cuddy
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