

## Chapter 7



# REFLECTIONS ON UNEARNED ADVANTAGES, UNEARNED DISADVANTAGES, AND EMPOWERING EXPERIENCES

MELBA J. T. VASQUEZ

IT HAS BEEN AN interesting experience to take time to reflect inwardly and examine the life experiences which I believe have influenced my worldview and commitment to multicultural psychology and social justice.

First, it is with mixed feelings that I am recognized as a "pioneer." I am honored, of course, to be considered in this category. However, the old familiar nagging feeling of doubt threatens; vestiges of the imposter syndrome surface. The old fears, mostly quieted at this stage of my life suggest, "They don't really know me, or they wouldn't have asked. . . ." Nonetheless, I will proceed *as if* I belong. It is what I have usually done, even when those around me didn't think I belonged. Typically, what happens is that before I or those around me know it, I do belong, even if grudgingly (on my part and/or theirs)!

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines a pioneer in part as "one who ventures into unknown or unclaimed territory . . . An innovator in any field." It was distressing to have entered the field in the late 1970s when so little had been done in the field of ethnic minority and multicultural psychology. Much progress has been made by many in the past three decades, but we still have so much to accomplish. I am amazed that there are still so few of us in this category of "pioneers."

We are asked to describe child and adolescent experiences that were influential in shaping our life experiences from a social, cultural, developmental, economic, and/or environmental perspective. Those do indeed shape our personal lives and professional identities. I have had the opportunity to reflect on those key experiences for the past few months and have

some thoughts to share. I would like to frame discussion of those in the context of those experiences I categorize as privileges and "unearned advantages," as well as those that contributed to challenges, oppression, and "unearned disadvantages." I then discuss "empowering experiences" and end with suggestions and recommendations for graduate students and young professionals.

## PRIVILEGES AND UNEARNED ADVANTAGES

"Privilege" was defined by Cactus Pryor, a Texas humorist, as the belief, feeling, and attitude that an individual has who was "born on third base" and thinks that they "hit a triple!" This sports metaphor does indeed capture the privilege we observe in White males born with the kinds of opportunities and advantages that lead to feelings of confidence and entitlement. There are many forms of privilege. It was only in the past decade of my life that I realized that I too have had many privileges throughout my life! The notion of "unearned advantages" also speaks to the notion of privilege in society.

I grew up in a small central Texas town during the 1950s. I was the first of seven children born to two firstborn parents. I was the oldest grandchild on my mother's side of the family and the third child (but firstborn of the oldest son) on my father's side. In other words, I had the privilege of a considerable amount of attention, adoration, and regard from my parents, large extended family (including 16 aunts and uncles and all 4 grandparents plus great uncles and aunts, second cousins, and so on!). I enjoyed what I wish every child had. When I walked into a room, faces lit up (most of the time)! I also grew up in a loving small community. The first 5 or 6 years of my life were relatively safe; in retrospect, I grew up in a small college community that was socially segregated. What an incredible experience of "unearned advantages." I had no substantive contact with the White European community until I entered first grade in the public school system.

Another instance of "unearned advantage" is that our parents, although relatively poor, scraped money together to send me and my siblings to the local Catholic parochial school for part of our elementary education. That meant that I attended St. John's Catholic School from fourth through seventh grade. Although the adjustments from public school to Catholic school and then back again were challenging, several of my siblings and I had the advantages of a small private school for a brief time. We had the opportunity to develop good study skills, to develop the capacity to adjust to different environments, and to know the special feeling that came from attending a private school.

I consider myself very lucky to be born into a family where parents were politically active in their local community. There was a unique empowerment that came from being a participant of political rallies, voter

registration projects, and related activities. I have no doubt that this role modeling and orientation, including the fact that my mother in particular served as a leader in all activities in which she became involved, have influenced my very strong belief that active involvement can lead to positive change. I saw firsthand as a child that one vocal person can make a difference. Although there were struggles and painful events along the way, the overall effect of my parents' activism was that proactive involvement was the way to direct the pain and anger of disenfranchisement. The privilege of being oriented to activism was a gift handed to me by my parents.

The attitudes on the part of my parents and their Chicano peers in our community was that education was important. The organizations in which my parents and their friends were involved were geared to fund-raise for scholarships for Hispanic students and to further the education of Latino children in the community. As a result of this influence, four of us in my family have at least college bachelor's degrees, and three have technical associate's degrees. Although we fought as children, we are very close as adult siblings. Family is very important to all of us. What an incredible privilege to have siblings who are all productive contributors to their respective communities and with whom we all provide support for one another.

Expectations to achieve were not conveyed in a pressured manner; while I was growing up, very few people in my community, including my parents, had completed high school. We were poor, and the notion of traveling far to go to school was not even a consideration. Yet the messages were clear that it was a time and period when change was happening and that we could take on the identity of those who could take risks to try opportunities. Perhaps the combination of having a paternal grandfather, who immigrated and established a small grocery store business, and a maternal grandfather, whose family was in Texas when Texas was still Mexico and who served as a ranch foreman since way before I was born, influenced the notion that leadership and proactivity were part of who we were. Both grandmothers were kind but strong matriarchs in their own right. Whatever the combination of experiences, I am grateful to have the transgenerational expectation (however subtle) and attitude that we could accomplish what opportunities led us to.

I thus experienced many privileges and "unearned advantages" in the development of motivation and attitudes of persistence and entitlement. Yet these were mixed with feelings of doubt, anxiety, and fear as a result of many challenges and "unearned disadvantages" that mostly came in the form of oppressive and discriminatory experiences.

### CHALLENGES, OPPRESSION, AND UNEARNED DISADVANTAGES

When I first entered elementary school in the first grade, I cried daily for weeks and weeks. My mother was very distressed, assuming separation

anxiety. She had not expected this, since during the first 6 years of my life I had been versatile in staying with any number of extended relatives; my parents had assumed that entering school would be an easy adjustment. Although what I felt may have been partly "separation anxiety," the experience of entering a White majority school, with not a single teacher or administrator of color, led to my world feeling suddenly unsafe. It was not the color difference but the attitudes of those with power toward those of us of color (primarily Hispanic, since there were very few Asian students, and Black students attended a segregated school). The subtle and not-so-subtle negative attitudes were clear. We were ignored, spoken to more curtly and harshly than the White children, and some of the children of color (mostly boys, as I recall) were treated harshly (e.g., knocked down on the playground) and called racial epithets. I remember feeling incredible empathy for Latino children who were abused on the playground and felt an immediate identification with and protection of those like me. I remember feeling the pain of loss of positive regard at both a personal and a group level but had no words to describe the loss and sadness and lack of safety and resulting anxiety that emerged.

What I learned in that year was that the world was unsafe, after all. When parents hand their children to the school system, they hope that those in charge will take as good care of their children as they did. When the system fails to do so, disadvantage to the children is one of the consequences.

Sometime in those early months, I learned that being a good student was what got some semblance of positive attention and regaining of safety. Fortunately, our parents had shown us the library early in our childhood and taught us to read before entering school.

Although my parents spoke Spanish to each other, they spoke English to us so that we could speak English when we entered school (both parents were "flunked" in the first grade for not speaking English). Ironically, although we technically spoke English better than Spanish, we had accents. I remember one very shaming experience where the teacher forced me to try to say "choo-choo" rather than "shoo-shoo." When I was not able to, I dissolved into tears, fearing being banished from the top reading group where stories were so much more interesting! I remember the quiet and tension from the rest of the students. It was very difficult to not know how to articulate the pain of those kinds of shaming experiences.

Sometime in those early years in elementary school, I had a boyfriend who was White. I do not recall whether we shared the status of "boyfriend/girlfriend" for one week or three months, but he came to school one day and told me that he could no longer be my boyfriend. His mother (who worked at the school) told him that I could not be his girlfriend because I was Mexican. I remember feeling confused and was frightened when my mother expressed outrage when I went home and asked, "Mom, what's wrong with being Mexican?" During those early years, I was confused by the apparent fact that White people had better cars, clothes, and houses; I wondered if

that was why they were treated better. I noticed that White people who were also poor were treated like we were treated. Yet I struggled with "internalized racism" and wondered why Whites as a group were more successful until I reached college and began to read about the effects of oppression and the histories of peoples of color as well as about class issues.

I was in college when my feminism began in earnest. It came out of a very mixed experience when I represented one of my organizations in one of the beauty contests held at the university. I was chosen as a semifinalist but very much disliked having to parade in bathing suits, gowns and to perform dance routines in shorts in front of an auditorium full of people. When I was nominated for another similar event, I declined, and my peers and advisers could not understand why. I did not yet have the ability to articulate how much I disliked that patriarchy objectified women by focusing on bodies and looks; all I could say at the time was that I felt too much like a cow being paraded about before the auction.

I experienced various other discriminatory and sexist experiences (and still do to this day), and more of those are described in the context of how they became empowering experiences.

## EMPOWERING EXPERIENCES

### *Parental Role Modeling*

I learned quite a bit about social justice from the actions of those around me during my developmental years. My parents each contributed to my positive development in different ways. My father was loving, kind, and socially popular among the Latino community, but he had little contact with the "White world," except in his work first as a farm worker (I suppose we were "sharecroppers" when we lived on that farm, although that was not a term we used) and then as a factory machine operator. My mother was also loving but also assertive in her anger about discriminatory events. My first memory of her advocacy took place in a J. C. Penny store. My mother observed an elderly Mexican American woman attempting to be waited on, holding a bolt of cotton material from which to purchase. The White clerk continued to chat and serve all other White customers who came up after the Latina woman. My mother interrupted the clerk, asked why she hadn't waited on the Latina woman. When the clerk attempted to ignore my mother, my mother loudly asked for the name of the manager and asked to see him immediately. The clerk quickly waited on the elderly Latina. I remember being very little (probably 3 or 4 years old) and very embarrassed at the event. I wished I could disappear into the cracks of the wooden floor of the store. In retrospect, I am, of course, very proud of my mother's willingness to confront cruel and disrespectful treatment of others. She did so often.

Although my mother worked throughout my elementary and high school years as a housekeeper, cook, and child-care person who ironed other people's clothes, she was very clear about the importance of justice, of education, and of the importance of behaving as if we were deserving, even when those around us did not convey that same message. She got her GED (high school equivalency diploma) and then a bachelor's degree at about the time I entered graduate school. By the time she retired a few years ago, she was the executive director of a community action program with a multi-million-dollar budget, had served on the local school board, and served as a consultant and traveled internationally. She still serves as an active leader in her community and has received multiple awards for her contributions. Yesterday, for example, when I called to speak to her at 8 a.m., she did not return my call until 10 p.m. because she'd been a polling judge for local elections all day long and then attended the party for the mayoral candidate who was successful in his campaign to become the community's first Asian mayor. How lucky I am to have such an active, high-energy mother who continues to live what she believes.

### *Women of Color Allies*

I'd like to share a story that illustrates my early formative experiences with women of color as allies. When I was in the second grade and my younger sister was in kindergarten, we rode on a bus to and from school. In 1957, although our school system had not integrated African American students into the schools (*Brown vs. Board of Topeka*, 1954), our bus system was integrated. Therefore, after school, our bus stopped at Bonham Elementary, where the African American children got on the bus after school.

One day, a large White boy, about 2 or 3 years older, who often bullied us all, came and roughly pushed my sister and me into a corner of our seat because he wanted to sit in that space across from his friends. I remember the fear and humiliation I felt for myself and for my sister. Yet we did nothing but sit silently, squashed by his large size. An African American young girl, about his size, saw what happened and came up, pushed his shoulder, and said in a very loud, assertive voice, "What are you doing? You can't do that to them. They're sitting there, can't you see, and you're crowding them. Move. Now!" He looked at her defiantly and said, "This ain't your business." She glared back and said, "It is now." The whole bus got quiet. She repeated in a low voice, "Move. Now." He got up and moved. The young Black girl went to her seat, came back, gave us each a piece of hard candy, and watched over us and others like us for the rest of the year.

I did not at that time know the words *oppression*, *White male privilege*, and *bullying* as they are used now, but that is some of what my sister and I experienced as a result of that young boy's behavior that day. And I did not know the words *ally*, *sisterhood*, and *creation of warm women of color spaces*, but I experienced those in my heart that day. And I know that the

experience formed a significant set of expectations in my heart and mind. The learning was that girls and women of color stood up for each other against oppression. My assumptions from that day forward included that women of color were very much in the same boat and that we should always stand together. I have wished many times that I could personally thank that person whose name I don't think I ever knew. All I can do is continue to help others when I can.

I learned from this and various other experiences that it was not the end of the world when someone treated you unfairly. Others—or oneself—can stand up to fight it! But it is so nice when an ally with power—and there are many forms of power—stands up to help or even initiates intervention. Building alliances and making connections is clearly a strategy for all of us to be more visible and powerful and is a major strategy for survival in this world in which we live. When we have the power and opportunity to be allies for others who are oppressed, we must all “give back.”

### *1960s Activism*

Another very important period of formation was in high school, which I attended in the mid and late 1960s. During my sophomore year in high school, the Blacks and Mexican Americans joined together to begin electing representatives to positions of leadership. I was one of about two dozen students elected as representatives on the Student Council, class officers, cheerleaders, and so forth. Although we were exhilarated by our successes, all of this was not without pain, struggle, and conflict. At one time, I was elected part of the “Homecoming Royalty.” I was the only person of color among five young women and five young men. Assuming that I knew what was happening, my favorite English teacher pulled me out of class and told me that she had told her son, who had also been elected a favorite, that if no one else was willing to serve as my escort at the presentation he must do so. She meant to be reassuring and did not realize that I had not yet heard that none of the White boys wanted to walk in with me. I remember feeling shame, humiliation, and confusion. Likewise, when I went to cheerleader camp with the other six cheerleaders (again, the only cheerleader of color that year), no one was my roommate, and I discovered that I had been left out of many slumber parties and events held by the other elected cheerleaders. Loneliness and exclusion were some of the prices to pay during that period. However, the support of my family, friends, and community helped carry me through those periods, even though I did not always share the pain of those experiences with others. Since then, at high school reunions

### *White European Allies*

I did not trust "Anglo" or "White people" as I thought of them until I was in college. One of my mentors, Dr. Colleen Conoley, went out of her way to ensure that I availed myself of many opportunities as an undergraduate and is responsible for encouraging me to enter graduate school in counseling psychology (I partly trusted her perception that I might do well in graduate school only after also being encouraged to enter a graduate program in sociology by a sociology professor and law school by a constitutional law professor during undergraduate school). Colleen Conoley was herself an alumna of University of Texas at Austin's counseling psychology program, and her son Collie entered the program a year ahead of me. She and her family were my first real White friends, and then I was open to developing other "White friends" during my first two years as a school-teacher.

After my first marriage failed, I unintentionally became involved with and married my current partner, Jim Miller. Although it was an adjustment for my parents and community (very few of us had become involved in "mixed marriages"), this experience taught me firsthand that some White men really can "get it" and that many other factors are important in various forms of connection and bonding at personal and professional levels. Many other European Americans evolved as "allies" and good friends. My world expanded during the two years that I taught middle school. I very much enjoyed that experience. It was while simultaneously working on a counselor education master's degree during those two years that I was encouraged to apply to a doctoral program.

In graduate school, several professors made discouraging comments, probably unintentionally at times. But many more were encouraging. My dissertation co-chairs, Gary Hanson and Earl Koile, were brilliant in their capacity to ensure that I maintained my motivation. Other members of the committee, Ira Iscoe, June Gallessich, and Gus Baron, added varied support. They are now colleagues, and we maintain some contact to this day. My former "bosses" Donna McKinley and David Drum (who were Directors at Colorado State University's Counseling Center and University of Texas at Austin Counseling and Mental Health Center, respectively, when I was at each place) are now good friends, and both are responsible for ensuring that I seek the Diplomate from the American Board of Professional Psychology. I engage in a variety of professional projects with two of my colleagues, and close friends, Sally Grenard Moore and Alice Lawler.

Upon joining the American Psychological Association, its Division 17, Counseling Psychology, was my "first home" division. Several of those among the leadership of Division 17, such as Ursula Delworth, John Alcorn, Donna McKinley, Jo-Ida Hansen, Jim Hurst, Al Ivey, Naomi Meara, Linda Forrest, and John Westefeld, encouraged my involvement. Manny Casas asked me to co-chair the Ethnic Minority Committee, which was my



first leadership position in Division 17. I was voted president-elect of the division for the year 2000–2001, and will serve as president in 2001–2002.

Many other "White allies" have been influential as well. Laura Brown convinced me to run for president of Division 35, Society for the Psychology of Women, my first division presidency, and Ken Pope invited me to co-author an ethics book with him after having served together on the APA Ethics Committee. Many other colleagues have also become good friends over the years. Many, many others have been supporters in both short- and long-term ways. In fact, more people than I can list have extended kindness in all kinds of ways.

### ***American Psychological Association Minority Fellowship Program and the Public Interest Directorate***

During my first year in graduate school, I was awarded one of the first APA Minority Fellowships. The program was directed first by Dalmas Taylor and then by James Jones, both of whom also served as mentors from afar and, in particular, encouraged involvement of Fellows in professional activities, especially in the APA. The program afforded financial support but also another reason to continue to work hard to achieve the goal of completing the doctoral program. Currently, the APA Public Interest Directorate, with Executive Director Henry Tomes, with Offices of Minority Affairs (Bertha Holliday), Women's Programs (Gwen Keita), and other key offices provide valuable staff support to the various projects initiated within APA. The Fellowship program has served as a very important part of my graduate training and professional life.

### ***Other Ethnic Minority Allies***

My first introduction to Latino psychologists was at the first Symposium on Chicano Psychology held in 1976 in California toward the end of my second year of graduate school. My peer and close friend to this day, Anna Gonzalez Sorensen, and I were partly supported by Ira Iscoe, then Director of University of Texas Counseling Center and one of the founders of Community Psychology, to attend the conference, where we met several of our future mentors, such as Martha Bernal, Manuel Ramirez, Amado Padilla, Art Ruiz, Manny Casas, and other salient "mentors from afar." It was also with some of those pioneers that I was able to participate in the founding of the National Hispanic Psychological Association just a couple of years after that symposium. It was an exhilarating experience to "immerse" ourselves with other Hispanic psychologists, and even now, that opportunity continues to be an important experience in my professional and personal life.

Other mentors, peers, and students/former students have been supporters, and I have established strong bonds from working on various projects with a wide variety of people, such as Carolyn Payton and Reiko True, women long active in the APA, who encouraged my participation as well. I have coauthored chapters and articles with former students Ay Ling Han, Cynthia de las Fuentes, and Natalie Eldridge. Staff members at the American Psychological Association have become life-long friends, including Gwen Keita and Lillian Comas Diaz, among so many others! John Moritsugu and many others helped found Division 45, Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues. Pam Reid, first woman of color president of Division 35, invited my active involvement in that Division when she asked me to serve as her program chair. Jessica Henderson Daniel, Janis Sanchez-Hucles, and others have been active supporters in Division 35. Derald Wing Sue, Rosie Phillips Bingham, Lisa Porsche Burke, and Steven James, cofounders and planners of the first and second National Multicultural Conference and Summit, feel as close to me as siblings. It was a privilege to serve as a Division President the same year that Dick Suinn served as APA President.

### *Affirmative Action*

Were it not for Affirmative Action I would not be a psychologist. I was one of the first of several graduate students of color admitted into the doctoral program at the University of Texas in the 1970s in an attempt to diversify the profession of psychology. The admissions program expanded the usual number of students accepted into the program. Although my GRE scores were in the acceptable range, they were not as high as many of the students'. I stubbornly set out to prove that I could achieve despite others' superior scores. That determination, and my mother's internalized belief that I would belong even when others thought I didn't, and the organization of a support system of graduate students of color and of women's groups helped me through the challenges of those years. Although there were no Latino faculty members, there were White faculty members who provided occasional encouragement of the work of interest, and I am grateful to those individuals.

Affirmative Action is indeed an important strategy to promote social justice. Despite the fact that Americans value equality and fairness, it is clear that women and ethnic minorities have historically not benefited from the valuing of those principles. Psychological knowledge can inform the debate, and I'd like to suggest that we all commit to continue supporting these very important strategies.

Affirmative Action most likely contributed to my job acquisitions at Colorado State University and then at the University of Texas at Austin. I am grateful to the director of the CSU Counseling Center at the time, Donna McKinley, and to the head of the department, Dick Suinn, for the

support and mentoring they provided. David Drum, director of the University of Texas Counseling Center, also supported my involvement in professional activities. Do I mind that Affirmative Action may have been a consideration in my hirings? On the contrary, I am grateful for the opportunities created by the increased conscientiousness that may have contributed to my consideration.

Were my peers with higher GRE scores superior to me? I remember expressing my vulnerability about my GRE scores to the head of the counseling psychology program, Royal Embree, who told me that a study he had done over several years showed an inverse relationship between the highest scores on GREs with ability to complete the program! He was very kind and encouraging when he shared that information with me.

Did my awareness of being an Affirmative Action designee harm my self-esteem? Although I struggled with the feeling of belonging, that feeling did not come as a result of having been admitted via Affirmative Action strategies. There is some evidence that Affirmative Action may actually raise the self-esteem of women and minorities by providing them with employment and opportunities for advancement. Retired General Colin Powell, after reviewing the results of a major study that challenged much of the conservative thinking about Affirmative Action, dismissed concerns about the alleged stigma that opponents say the program imposes. An article in the September 9, 1998 edition of the *New York Times* reported Powell as saying, "I would tell black youngsters to graduate from the (prestigious) schools magna cum laude and get one of those well-paying jobs to pay for all the therapy they'll need to remove that stigma."

After obtaining my Ph.D., I spent the next 13 years at two different university counseling centers, part of the time serving as training director at each setting (Colorado State University and University of Texas at Austin). Both experiences provided me with the opportunities to develop my interests in ethnic minority psychology, psychology of women, and training and supervision both in my provision of services and in my writings. I also developed my interest in professional activities, becoming involved in a variety of APA divisions, boards and committees, and state and regional associations related to psychology. I have been in full-time private practice for the past 10 years and have continued those professional leadership and volunteer activities as well as my writing. I am driven and motivated by my very strong belief that many pioneers before me contributed to increasing opportunities for many such as myself. I believe that it is partly my responsibility to expand those opportunities for others. It is also important for us to increase the competency of those who deliver services, conduct research, and provide training in areas of diversity, as for populations such as ethnic minorities, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons, disabled persons, and others.

## STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following strategies and recommendations are for those of you who are graduate students or young professionals. They are based on my experiences and on my observations of those of my students of color and clients of color.

- *Take risks.* Allow curiosity and energy to give direction to areas in which you wish to explore your power and salience. Phoebe Eng, in her book *Warrior Lessons* (1999), states that "sometimes we've got to force ourselves into battle—for beliefs, for our boundaries, and to defend big pictures. Becoming a wise fighter, after all, is less about shouting and more about strategy" (p. 197). She also suggests that learning to fight the good fight means understanding that our successes do not imply the failure of others. We must believe that there is plenty to go around. Risk takers often find that true fearlessness is not the elimination of fear, but the transcendence of fear, the movement through it and not against it. Fearlessness means the willingness to "lean into the anxiety and fear."
- *Allow for imperfections and mistakes.* Mistakes are part of life. Acknowledge them to yourself (and to others, if necessary), learn from them, fix them as much as possible, and move on. Do not let them define you. They are a part of every human's experience. Men tend to attribute success to themselves and failures to others. Women tend to attribute success to luck, support of others, and failures to themselves. We must let go of shame and learn the philosophy of "Bummer, oh well!" We must transcend the fear of failure, cast it aside, and listen to our kinder selves.
- *Engage in self-care.* You are the only one who can ensure that you exercise, eat healthily, have a good balance of work, rest, play, and relationships, set appropriate boundaries, and so on. We have to be able to treat ourselves as precious as we do anyone else.
- *Develop self-confidence.* We must constantly practice how to hold ourselves out with confidence, how to articulate our ideas, and how to face creative conflict in order to reach resolutions. These are simply skills that can be developed through practice. Continue to articulate the value of diversity and inclusion in decision making and power. We need individuals who are able and willing to articulate commitment to diversity issues. Phoebe Eng talks about modern-day warrior women of color. She believes that "power from within" (confidence) is based on the inherent value in each of us, separate from that which represents us to others. Power from within recognizes that groups and alliances are strong and balanced only when each of the members is strong and balanced. If we have power from within, we are relatively freed from the weight of outside expectations, downward pressure, and confining stereotypes. We can be released to act genuinely and freely. Otherwise, "our lives begin to end the day we are silent about things that matter," according to Martin Luther King, Jr.
- *Observe role models and mentors.* Mentors are scarce. Use them situationally—and at a distance. I have received much mentoring and guidance from my peers and, sometimes, have learned lots from watching youn-

ger students and professionals. I have also been fortunate to learn from various senior people: of color, White, male, and female. Observe the skills and strengths of others and decide whether you wish to cultivate those as well.

- *Use your anger to empower your lives.* Our upbringing and social codes can make it difficult to allow us to experience anger, and many of us haven't learned how to translate those feelings to create change in the situations around us. We may assume that if we are good and respectful to others, those behaviors will be reciprocated. This expectation can interfere with our right to rage and anger, which can be transformed into healthy, assertive expressions that say "We count," "I am to be respected," "You may not mistreat me," and "I am deserving." Or it may be unbridled and destructive in its expression. Anger is a healthy signal that tells us and those around us where our boundaries are, what we instinctively feel is tolerable or intolerable, and can signal when those limits have been trespassed. Conflict is necessary because difference is inherent in every endeavor. Channeling anger through constructive acts can be empowering.
- *Engage in activism.* We can depend on ourselves as individuals and groups to make a difference. We must also develop alliances with power structures and set up policies and structures to make a difference. Affirmative Action types of strategies are absolutely necessary for continued change.
- *Engage in support systems and provide support to others.* Empowering others can be the same as empowering ourselves. The precious and powerful standing up for each other is one of the most exquisite gifts to give and to receive.

This quote by Nelson Mandela in his inauguration speech is from Lillian Comas-Diaz's editorial in the journal *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health* (1998, Vol. 4, p. 151):

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of the universe. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of creation. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

## RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

- Han, A. L., & Vasquez, M. J. T. (1997). Group interventions and treatment with ethnic minorities. In J. F. Aponte, R. Y. Rivers, & J. Wohl (Eds.), *Psychological interventions and cultural diversity* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pope, K., & Vasquez, M. J. T. (1998). *Ethics in psychotherapy and counseling: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Vasquez, M. J. T. (1998). Latinos and violence: Mental health implications and strategies for clinicians. *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health*, 4, 319-334.

- Vasquez, M. J. T., & de las Fuentes, C. (1999). American-born Asian, African, Latina and Native American adolescent girls: Challenges and strengths. In N. G. Johnson, M. Roberts, & J. Worell (Eds.), *Beyond appearance: A new look at adolescent girls*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Vasquez, M. J. T., & de las Fuentes, C. (1999). Hate speech or freedom of expression? Balancing autonomy and feminist ethics in a pluralistic society. In M. Brabeck (Ed.), *Practicing feminist ethics in psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Correspondence regarding this chapter may be sent to Melba J. T. Vasquez, Anderson House at Heritage Square, 2901 Bec Cave Road, Box N, Austin, TX 78746 (e-mail address: [MelVasquez@aol.com](mailto:MelVasquez@aol.com)).