

THE NORTHEASTERN ONTARIO WOMEN'S CONFERENCE 1981-4:

BREAD AND ROSES, ALTERNATIVES TO DESPAIR

Gayle Broad, Joan Kuyek

"...We have put on five conferences, and created a network of fifty or so women who share a common vision of the world they want to create. Increasingly we have come to understand why there is such an enormous gap between what is and what we would like to be. Because we believe that the key to developing social change lies in a participant's experience, we wanted to create a conference environment where this kind of experience could be expressed, examined and flower..."

(from "Through the Looking Glass" conference brochure of April, 1984, the final Northeastern Ontario Women's Conference)

From January of 1981 until April of 1984, a small group of women hosted 5 conferences that had a powerful and lasting effect on the participants. The "network of fifty or so women" who participated went on to work on several Northern Ontario women's conferences, and were active in changing the face of labour, environmental, health, education and women's movements in the North. What happened at these conferences, what made them different from other conferences, why were they so successful at developing and energizing women activists? These are the questions we hope to answer. This article is written as a conversation between the authors.

Joan: Women had been crucial to the success of the lengthy INCO strike of 1978-9 in Sudbury. During that time, we had learned a lot about the ways in which large multi-national corporations organized our lives for us in northern Ontario, and we desperately wanted to get to change it. Some of us felt that unless we understood how these companies disorganized us, we would never be able to create the kinds of changes that women really wanted and needed. We began to look for opportunities to do this work in a collective setting. When Mary Lou Murray and I attended a conference on Women and Well-Being in Toronto in March 1981, the opportunity presented itself.

Gayle: Nathan was 9 months old when I had a chance to go to a conference on health in Toronto, entitled "Women and Well-being". I wasn't able to socialize with the other participants because daycare ended when the conference workshops ended, and as Nathan was one of those all-night-long breast-fed babies, I didn't have much energy to go out in the evenings, anyway. I missed quite a bit because of this. On the last day, we had a "Northeastern Ontario caucus" meeting - I remember wondering what a caucus was, exactly. Many of the women already knew each other, and the discussion moved to having a conference closer to home, where we could get together again and find a way of working together as a group. I supported this idea and suggested that a small grant that the women (all six of us who called ourselves feminists) in Sault Ste. Marie had obtained for a local conference, could perhaps be used to host a larger conference. Joan and Mary Lou from Sudbury agreed to find speakers, and the first Northeastern Ontario Women's Conference was born.

Joan: Mary Lou and I couldn't believe how fortunate we were to have this opportunity to put a workshop together. Gayle and Lavera Crack came from the Sault for a planning meeting. They wanted to look after all the physical arrangements, but said that Mary Lou and I should take care of the conference design. We called the conference "Women and Multinationals". It was to be held in Sault Ste. Marie at the Ramada Inn, although -- due to limited funding -- everyone was billeted and meals were provided at a chain restaurant -- Smiley's --next door.

We spent hours trying to figure out how we could design a conference that really changed the behaviour of participants. We felt that, too often, we had attended conferences and workshops where people were overwhelmed with information that took away their ability to act, and made no real difference in how they conceptualized the world around them. We looked at what we needed from a conference; we re-examined successful learning experiences; we consulted with others. What we came up with were some simple basics:

- * We needed, very quickly to create an atmosphere of trust and intimacy, so that women could feel safe to examine new ideas and to say "I don't know".

- * We needed to find resource people who could speak in ways that the participants could understand without difficulty, and who would respect the participants enough to see themselves as only one expert amongst many.

- * We needed to find ways for participants to immediately use the new information they heard in actions that were related to their daily lives and their home communities, without setting up more work or commitments for them at home (too many of us went to conferences and came home with new commitments that disorganized the work we were already doing)

We looked around for a resource person who could talk about Women and Multinationals

and settled on Kari Levitt. And then the week of the conference Levitt was unable to come. We called everyone we could think of and ended up with Marguerite Cassin, a graduate student working with Dr. Dorothy Smith at OISE.

Marguerite: On Wednesday, it was around 11 pm, I think, I got this call from a woman who asked me if I could come to Sault Ste. Marie that weekend to speak for about 1/2 hour on women and multinationals and to stay around and participate in the discussion for the rest of the weekend. I was so excited, I stayed up all night working on my presentation.

Joan: Discovering Marguerite and the work of Dorothy Smith was crucially important to the future usefulness of these conferences. They approached our work with respect and passion. Marguerite Cassin was invited back after the first conference, and participated in all five of those organized by the NEOWC planning committee. There were many reasons for conference participants and planners to be enthusiastic about her participation, not least because of her understanding of what the conferences were trying to do and the analysis of societal organizing principles.

Marguerite (from a summary she prepared at the conclusion of the third conference):

I learn much more from you than I contribute...also my work is such that it must be taken up by people like yourselves in order to be useful....you are offering your resource people something very special...an opportunity to be entered into a very exciting process, that is working.

Gayle: As always, we learn from our mistakes as well as our successes. Some of the important learnings from this first conference related to physical arrangements, and they were incorporated into future planning. People need decent food to eat and some opportunities for exercise. Billeting is a wonderful way to connect with one another and provides more opportunities for the processing of information.

Lavera and I felt totally responsible for the small turnout - very few women from Sault Ste. Marie and surrounding area attended. I myself was not "captured" by the idea of learning about multinationals, and only went out of a sense of duty. Joan introduced the discussion on Saturday by stating that we could look at the turnout as a great disappointment or as a great opportunity - here were 25 women activists who were willing to give up a weekend out of their busy lives to begin to build a network for change. Suddenly we felt like we were being adventurous, that we had strength and that we were in this thing together. By the end of the weekend, I had fundamentally shifted in many of my values - for the first time in an educational setting, I had an opportunity to analyze my own personal experience in the context of a world driven by organizational imperatives that conflicted with the organizational imperatives of people.

I learned on a cognitive level, but more importantly, I had the opportunity to take this information and integrate it with my own life - by the end of the weekend, I realized that the material security I had been clinging to had actually been controlling my choices, that I would have to "let go" of financial security, if I wanted to take charge of my life. There was no contest - within weeks, I was working at the Women's Resource Centre, part-time for \$100 per week, and certain that this was the work I wanted to do.

That first conference had several ingredients that are now recognized as crucial to the later success of the other conferences: a dynamite analysis in language we could understand and that was located in our daily lives, significant amounts of time set aside for simulated problem-solving - a technique introduced to the group by Joan, and refined at later conferences; an opportunity to "play" and be entertained, a skill that Lavera Crack encouraged to flower; and a wrap-up discussion that focused on reflecting what we had learned and when we could get together again, instead of on resolutions or plans of action.

Joan: During and immediately after this first conference in the Sault, we formed a core collective to work on future conferences: Gayle and Mary Lou (who worked at the Women's Centres in the Sault and Sudbury), Cathy Cervin (a doctor in Timmins), Katherine Fournier (from Hearst), Cathy Ingwerson (a peace activist from New Liskeard) and myself (a community legal worker). This group struggled with the process and content of the workshops, trying to make them better each time. From time to time, other women participated in the collective, depending on where the conference was to be held.

We would meet for a weekend every two months or so between conferences, usually in Sudbury, because it was the most accessible. These meetings were intense experiences for all of us. We would arrive on Friday night and catch up with each others busy and active lives. All of us were engaged in demanding projects in our own communities, and had many responsibilities at home. We made sure our planning for the conference took these contexts seriously. We stayed at each other's homes, and talked.

Gayle: When we came to Sudbury for the planning meetings, Cathy and I usually slept on the mattress on the floor of the spare bedroom of MaryLou's house. There we talked until 3 or 4 am about our lives, our parents, our partners, our emotions. We listened and we talked, and then went away until the next meeting 2 or 3 months later, giving ourselves time for reflection and understanding of how our lives are being transformed by the process of planning these conferences. If there is one memory that stays with me more than any other it is the thought of the hours of listening and talking -- individually and in a group-- that developed a level of trust with the other women who worked on this with me, that I have rarely experienced with anyone else or in another organization.

We explored the issues affecting our lives: poverty, children, food, work, violence, loneliness. As our trust with one another grew, so did our ability to analyze the issues, and connect them with one another. We didn't need to compete with one another, because there was nothing to be won or lost; we built on one another's ideas and visions: expanding, revising, revisiting, until we all found we had found the *root*, that was the basis for our next step in the learning process.

Marguerite (from comments following one of the conferences): The purpose of this formulation is to try to show you how you organize the conference work. Really, to reflect for you how I see you working. It begins with an observation -- we often get things wrong and don't see how it happened and the same goes for getting things right. There is nothing wrong with that. We learn from it, by trial and error and we learn what works and doesn't. However, I have heard you all talk about how well you work together and how it just works mysteriously for you. Of course

the work you do displays that it isn't magic, but a set of working practices -- you respect one another, listen and are prepared to have disagreements, have a lot of experience and in most ways you all want the same things...you have strong understandings about how to take up different work and bring it together...

So your work brings the conferences into being. It does not however depend solely on your work, the women who come work while they are there. The two parts of the work bring off the conferences.

The conferences have the character of praxis. (Not in the sense of theory of the kind that comes full blown out of the abstract halls of detached ideas controlling and organizing practice). The way I use praxis is to formulate the way in which you begin in the north, where you live and see the problems and issues of women. You work to bring women who share the problems together. You use "resource people" to help you to present the issues of your and the lives of the women who come in a framework, an analysis. You learn as you go and so do the conference participants. The work presented by your resource people is taken up as it can be used in getting the work done...It gets left behind if it is not useful.

The conference work is evolving. It is educational. It develops women's skills and capacities. It connects women who are active and brings women who are not , into a setting where at a minimum they can learn about what other people are doing.

It is important for me to see that the strength of the conference and of the steering committee is that they both function quite similarly, that there is not a division between the steering committee and participants in the conferences in terms of concerns, working style and life situation. Your organizational work teaches women at the conferences how to work. Look

at the style: each of you introduced, chaired or otherwise took public responsibilities for the conduct of the conference.

Gayle: Over time we improved our work on these conferences, paying attention to how the women who came participated.

Because everyone had to travel on Fridays, sometimes for as long as eight hours (we had no money for airfares), we knew that people could not spend much time being "talked at". We did try this once at Camp Wakonda at our "More than Bandages: Healing for People not for Profit" conference in November of 1982, and deeply regretted it: no one had the energy to absorb what they had to say, and the speakers felt marginalized and angry.

When it worked, Friday night was a time for arrival, being greeted by friendly faces and assigned a comfortable billet. We tried to provide some opportunity for those who arrived early to "get into" the conference right away though: sometimes with a selection of films, making sure they were not too intense, and later with the Game of Life. This game was developed by Joan and Marylou specifically for one of the conferences and used thereafter with great success. Resembling the "Poverty Game" which was later developed and popularized, the Game of Life allowed people to enter and leave the game at will, but always forced the player to make choices which would benefit oneself, one's community, or some other not so benevolent group.

Joan: the Game of Life was developed by Mary Lou and I over a bottle of wine in an effort to find some effective technique for starting a conference where women arrived at all sorts of different hours and had to wait around for billets to turn up. We didn't want this time to be

"wasted" and wanted to find some way to get strangers talking about profound subjects with one another. The Game of Life has no winners or losers. It is to be played in groups of five or six. A little "person" goes around a board landing on squares labelled *money, education, community, decisions*. For each of these, there is a pile of cards. Written on each card is a decision " you decide to live in a co-operative house", "you decide to spend \$350. on an antique vase", and so on. The person who draws that card then has to discuss the decision with the other players and they collectively decide *who profits* from the decision: *I, We, or They* (*They* is defined by the group). On the *Decision* squares, a problem is presented for group solution: "your best friend comes to visit and brings her favourite porn film", etc. it worked like magic.

Gayle: Because there were so many new women at conferences we had to find as many opportunities for meeting and getting to know each other as possible: at mealtime -- when we often had both informal and formal sharing of what we were doing in our different communities, with long unstructured breaks, with numbering off into a variety of small groups, with silly physical games, charades, doing chores together. This sharing served many purposes: we were able to get to know each other better; it helped us realize we were working on many different issues - environmental, health, community economic development, violence against women, to name a few; it helped us make connections with others who were doing the same things we were or who were doing what we wanted to be doing.

Real change in the way we work, transformation, can only come about when there is an atmosphere of trust. Again, many of the exercises and activities at the NEOWC were designed to ensure that the women present were comfortable enough, felt safe enough, to talk about and

explore their own values. Several of the underlying assumptions of the conference were based on values that significantly contributed to this atmosphere. The conferences numbers were limited to 80. Initially, of course, there was no necessity to limit numbers, but by the final conference, the planning committee realized the maximum number of participants. This actual numerical limitation allowed the planning committee to attend to personal needs of conference participants, and also allowed for participants to recognize speakers and develop friendships. To increase the intimacy of the group, participants were encouraged to spend the whole weekend together, rather than dispersing to shop or be entertained outside of the conference. The "playtime" of Saturday nights reenforced this further, as did the small group work that was a part of every conference.

The planning committee also accepted that there would be wide variation in participants' previous exposure to some of the issues: not everyone would know and understand why we tried to avoid fast foods and styrofoam cups; not everyone would use language or conduct themselves in a manner that was "politically correct". Instead, the planning concentrated on ways that women could share their knowledge and understanding of issues with one another, sensitizing one another to different issues, and helping them realize that they were all part of a larger whole. Thus the importance of selecting speakers who could help with this analysis, and also the importance of ensuring that all participants felt respected, and respected others.

In the fall of 1982, a phone call from Sudbury and a show of support from women who had participated in the NEOWC, enabled Sault women to take advantage of an opportunity for action to call the government to account. Russ Ramsey, then Minister of Labour and MPP for Sault Ste. Marie publicly stated that equal pay for work of equal value would be "the straw that

broke the camel's back" of the economy. Although the women from the women's centre in the Sault were outraged, it wasn't until the Sudbury Women's Centre called us asking what we intended to do that we were spurred to action. We hastily sent an invitation to Russ Ramsey to join us at the women's centre for lunch. At first we were just going to tell him what we thought of his comments, through the expected media attendance of course - no one expected that the Minister of Labour would actually attend. Then someone came up with the idea of granting him the "Pacifier Award", an idea that came from NAC's annual meeting. Merle decided to write a poem. The media jumped on the idea. One Wednesday afternoon, within a few days of Ramsey's ill-chosen remark, about 40 women and newspaper reporters, TV cameras and radio microphones jammed into the small living room of the women's centre to present Russ Ramsey with a giant soother and show all of Ontario that feminists do indeed have a sense of humour.

Joan: In 1983, INCO shut down for six months, and the consequences were terrible in the community. A group of union activists asked the women to get involved in protest actions around this issue. However, because of the work we had done in the NEOWC, the women's movement understood that work to change INCO's activity in Sudbury had to be taken up in the realities of women's daily lives. The Nickel Alliance was organized on the basis of NEOWC practice: working in small groups, collective decision making, bringing our whole lives to the meeting, and starting from the problems and concerns of women. The traditional male leaders were outraged and proceeded to take the group apart. The women shifted their focus and worked with issues around increasing homelessness, neighbourhood action and welfare rights. We were able to see these as more effective ways to take on the company at that time because we had learned

to trust our own experience.

Marguerite: the point of developing an analysis is to be able to use it to reveal how features of our lives are organized outside us and how we can begin to control our lives more. Because of the complex character of our world this is a big task, since economics, politics...are all bound up together"

Gayle: Our growing analysis was deepened and made useful to participants by trying to use it in action. We used a number of techniques like simulation games and popular theatre to allow this to happen in the conference format.

The simulations were designed by the conference planning committee and involved real people and real problems. A paragraph or two set the context for a small group of women to develop a strategy for working through a simulated community problem. The problem might be drinking water polluted by the town's major employer, and the group working on it would be assigned roles of people found in a community in the North - an environmentalist busy with two young children, a stay-at-home Mom who depends on her husband's employment by the polluter for the family's livelihood, etc. The people in the group would adopt their roles, and work out a strategy for dealing with the issue, drawing on their own knowledge and experience, and using resource people to help. This activity developed analysis, skills and strong bonds among the participants. They learned different ways of looking at the problem by listening to each other, and by using the analysis provided by speakers; they learned to look for allies in their communities - people whom they could work with that they might not have thought to ask to

come out before; they began to realize the extent of their own expertise.

At the Through the Looking Glass conference in Sudbury, Dorothy Smith and Marguerite spoke about the media and how a "story" in the news reports is organized. They used several stories to illustrate this. Then we used "newspaper theatre" to explore a news report about a demonstration by a community group trying to draw attention to an issue (I no longer remember what the issue was). The participants used body sculpture to show what the articles did not say. What the news story left out of course, was all the telephone calls and letters that were sent out trying to get people to attend; the preparation of the news releases and then the telephone calls to the media to get them to report on the event; the picking up of coffee urns, cups, etc. so that the demonstrators could be given a hot cup of coffee, and the scrounging for funds to pay for the coffee. Then there was the agonizing over who should speak, what should they say, making sure the police were okay with the location of the demonstration. In fact, what the news report reported was a very minor part of what had really happened yet that was what was visible to others not participating in the demonstration. Dorothy and Marguerite spoke as well about how one small word could create a completely different perception of the event - stating "only" forty people came out makes the event look small and unrepresentative whereas "at least" forty people makes it sound like a large gathering. I have never read or listened to a news report since with an uncritical eye or ear, and whenever I hear of an event, I think about the people and the energy behind it. Whenever I am involved in organizing an activity that will be reported, I try to think of ways of conveying to the public what this event is really about, what our group is really doing, and I have come to realize that news reports are only one very limited form of communication.

Joan: the Timmins Conference grew out of the planning committee's acknowledgement that it was despair that often kept us from dealing with issues like war and the nuclear industry. We organized Bread and Roses: Alternatives to Despair. This conference included dance and theatre workshops that helped us to work the tensions out of our bodies and minds and talk about those issues that made us feel the most helpless. This workshop later inspired the central theme for my book on community organizing.

To my mind there were key learnings about our reality as women in northern Ontario that I took away from these conferences:

- * that when we characterize the difficulties in our reality as issues instead of as themes, we fragment it and exhaust ourselves. In NEOWC, we consciously tried to build a way of seeing reality that sought our common themes and root causes. All issues are different windows on the same reality.

- * our lives are organized by forces outside ourselves and in a set of interests different than our own. They shape our daily reality from bus routes, to work, to recreation, to the food we eat and the way we raise our children. When we see the common patterns in these forms of organization we can better see how to resist/change them.

- * the information we need to get control of our lives is often located in language and forms we cannot access: in the halls of academia.

- * the holistic approach we adopted enabled us to understand what our native sisters had been trying to tell us about the role of women in the community and to begin to learn from them about building healthy communities

- * resistance to the corporate agenda for our lives can begin in our daily lives and our

communities. We will heal ourselves based on mutual aid, circles of strength and creating alternative economies and social forms.

Gayle: After three and a half years of intense work, planning, organizing and sponsoring conferences, many planning committee members made choices that took the work into other venues. Mary Lou went to work for the National Action Committee in Ottawa, Cathy Cervin left the north, and now teaches community-based medicine in Halifax, Kathy Ingwerson became active involving women in the environmental movement, Katherine Fournier moved to Toronto Joan and I, in different jobs, remained active in our home communities.

Joan: The conferences themselves had influenced the style and direction of most women's meetings to such an extent that we were constantly consulted about format for conferences. Women had begun to take on economics as a women's issue: challenging definitions, concepts of a "job", seeing corporate structures themselves as a woman's issue.

Gayle: We have all continued to work in the community- just a few examples: several conference planners/participants went on to take an active role in politics - as municipal councillors and school trustees, as candidates at the provincial and federal level, as policy advisors; several took on employment which involved teaching others what they had learned, at universities, in national organizations, in local community-based non-profits; others began or continued active community development at the "grassroots" level, developing services for abused women, people in conflict with the law, children's programs.

We found people who believed us and believed in us and, at a time when there were no feminist therapists, we provided that to one another. We listened to each other's stories - I'll never forget Susan Hare talking about her experience of racism - and we were forever changed by them, because these stories had happened in our communities and now we were seeing them from a different side. The stories brought us to a place where we could no longer hide, because it was in ourselves and our families.

As organizers we trusted the women who came to the conferences to explore new worlds, new ways of seeing and being. Most conference organizers want to be certain of "outcomes", most funders want reports that show "plans of action". What we were doing at the North Eastern Ontario Women's conferences was building energy -- energy which the women took back into their own communities to make change.

Northeastern Ontario Women's Conferences:

October 16-18, 1981, *Women and Multinationals*, Sault Ste. Marie

May 16-17, 1982, *Who's Screwing You?*, Sudbury

November 7-9, 1982. *More Than Band-aids*, Camp Wakonda

May 13-15, 1983, *Bread and Roses: Alternatives to Despair* Timmins

April 12-14, 1984, *Through the Looking Glass*, Sudbury