Critical Social Work

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Resilience

(A true story with some fiction mixed in)

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Mattawa, Ontario is located at the confluence of the Mattawa and Ottawa Rivers, east of North Bay on the Ontario-Quebec border. On the Quebec side of the river, high on top of the hill, stand three crosses. These crosses were first erected by Samuel De Champlain's party in 1614 to mark the place where the rivers met. From downstream on the Ottawa, the crosses could be seen from a great distance. Champlain's party were the first white people to see this place. Over the centuries, the crosses weathered and were replaced when necessary.

If you go to Mattawa today, at the museum they will tell you that in the early 1930's the crosses disappeared. Local wags say that they were put back up but disappeared again. Just as mysteriously, they reappeared in the late 1960's. They've remained standing ever since.

1968. Toronto. My bedroom was in the basement, below my parents' room. The phone rang at about 9:45 p.m. The phone only rang that late at night if there was something wrong. I could hear my Dad talking... asking someone "When?" and then, "I'll be there tomorrow." My Mom was working the afternoon shift, so I went upstairs and asked if he'd like some help packing and whose funeral was he going to? He snapped, "What makes you think I'm going to a funeral?" I answered that I had heard him on the phone making plans to go north and it was mid-week. The only reason he EVER took time off work and went north during the week was if someone died. He then laughed and said, (more to himself than to me) "Yeah, somebody died all right. But I'm not going to a funeral", whereupon he resumed chuckling to himself. All that I could get out of him was that a priest had died, and he went back to laughing and packing.

For many years, I wondered what that incident with my Dad had been about. You see, my Dad HATED the church. In the 1960's, back when nobody talked about that stuff, he did. He wouldn't let any of us kids anywhere near a Catholic Church and resisted most efforts to get us into any church at all. When he was drinking, if the subject came up, he'd say stuff I was old enough to understand like, "No way will I ever let one of those perverts get their hands on MY kids.... I'd kill them first!" Something about the way he'd say it left me with images of dead priests slain by Indians. So the fact that my dad traveled to the north because a priest had died remained one of the big mysteries of my childhood.

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Fast forward several years and I am an adult. Dad and I were sitting in the kitchen late at night. The card game was over. Dad won. Everyone else had gone home or had gone to bed. "Here Dad, have another beer." I pulled out a chair and sat back, relaxed. I began, "You know, there's something I've always wondered about!" (with a grin...)

He smiled back.

I asked, "Do you remember, when we lived on Monica Drive, you went north because some priest died?"

His laughter still resonates in my ears.

I chuckled with him for a moment, then, "I've always wondered; what the Hell was that about?"

Dad told me the rest of the story....

Sometime in the early 1930's, my Dad and two other young boys crossed the Ottawa River at Mattawa late one night. This was no small feat, as even today the Ottawa River rushes past Mattawa, its flow undisturbed by any bridges. The three adolescent boys climbed the hill in the dark.

The next morning, people in the town were shocked to see the hill across the river barren of the crosses that had stood in that place for over 300 years.

One day soon after, a group of people climbed the hill and re-erected the crosses. They didn't stand for a week. This time, they were destroyed. It wouldn't be a simple matter of climbing a hill in daylight and putting up a cross that was lying there on the ground.

For the second time in over 300 years, the people of Mattawa awoke to a hill barren of these markers.

That morning (quite early), three young boys went to St. Anne's Church to talk to Father Duquette. They were tired and probably dirty from their night time excursion. They needed desperately to speak to the priest before the town awoke. The conversation must have been quite interesting (and one-sided)... It went something like this:

"Father, those crosses are gone. We did it."

"You have to make sure those crosses are NEVER put back up again. If you don't, we will burn the church next."

"You will never touch any of us again."

"As long as you live, every day, you will see that hill with no crosses on it and you will know that your God knows what you did".

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And finally, "After you are dead, we will climb that hill again and put them back up."

After the rage, the old man started laughing quietly again. He told me, "Shit, that hill was way steeper in the dark when I was almost 50...."