

The Loyal Opposition

“... we are still joined
in common cause
against a powerful enemy.”

By Burton Blatt

Dear friend,
Although I predicted their anger, I was nevertheless taken aback by the strong, personal reactions to my “bandwagon” letter. Apparently, my colleagues and allies felt personally attacked by my views. They believed that I was not only discussing my concerns about a general advocacy problem, but that I was also admitting my dissatisfaction with them, specifically and personally.

During the past decade, advocates have had to become tough to fight against overwhelming odds. From time to time, they have had to overstate their cases to sway hostile opposition. I hope that we are not at the point where we are unable to take criticism about our own convictions, even if the criticism contains a tinge of overstatement. I have tried to listen for the affection behind their anger. My criticism was not meant for anyone personally; it was a professional critique that I feel is very necessary.

We need advocates precisely because of the way in which our political and economic system works. The system supposes that if everyone grabs as much as possible, everyone will get what they deserve. The poor, the weak and the disabled are, however, at a great disadvantage in such a system. These victims have not been able to get their fair share. One solution to their plight has been assigning advocates to take for the weak what they are unable to take for themselves.

At one time, it took courage to be an advocate for the retarded, the homeless, and all people who are, in general, powerless. It was unusual to join those who were against indiscriminate institutionalization. As often happens with revolutionary movements, what was once unusual has become usual; advocacy has become a safe, popular position. The result of turning advocacy into an “institution” in itself can only create a permanent state of war between disabled people and their advocates, and the opposition.

Advocacy should be a *temporal* political tool if we are to be true agents of social change. Advocacy should exist only as long as it is needed to counteract the destructiveness of a society gone wrong—a society in which avarice and materialism predominate. As our long-range social goal, we should try to eliminate the need for advocacy or, at the very least, to minimize the need. Advocacy networks should not become as common as fire departments or schools. Rather, they should exist to reduce the effects of a society that emphasizes the survival of the fittest.

A truly civilized society would not need advocates. Ideally, our system should not treat the powerless like card players who are dealt either good or bad hands. As it is now, how successful the powerless are at obtaining their inalienable rights depends on the individual competence of the advocates involved.

We have to understand people who justify indiscriminate institutionalization, even if we regard them as opponents of freedom and community, and even if we consider them vicious and hold them responsible for certain “crimes” committed against disabled people. We have to care about all human beings.

We must thoroughly understand our opponents’ position if we wish to change their beliefs and practices. If we demand that they change without attempting to meet their concerns, we violate their human rights and their humanity. Also, understanding the institutionalizers’ original premise can provide us with the means of their rehabilitation. Robert Frost once went halfway around the world to tell Premier Khrushchev that, precisely because he was a world leader, he must be magnanimous. As moral leaders, advocates must also be magnanimous.

When we fight for moral issues, we do so with the conviction that we are right. But having conviction is not the same as being right. If we fail to understand that our position is only one possible solution to the problem, then we may become nearsighted zealots. The dangerous consequences of being wrong are always present, even when we are aware of the frailty of our convictions. We are always responsible for injustices done in the name of justice. It may be necessary to seem very sure of ourselves to gain the courage to act, but we should try hard to remember our beliefs and what we are trying to impress on others.

I am sorry if I have inadvertently hurt some people’s feelings, but I feel that it is important to discuss the problems of advocacy. I had hoped that the war was nearly over, but I have now learned that it has hardly begun. The recent Pennsylvania court decision that modifies the rulings against deinstitutionalization is a clear reminder of our problems. We are still at war. Perhaps I shouldn’t have said anything to cause divisiveness in the ranks because we *are* still joined in common cause against a powerful enemy. I do not think, however, that my criticism was treasonous; at the very most it was indiscrete. ■