

Lilli Sprintz 1969 – 1974

Philadelphia: the Beginning

It was 1969. I was on the campus of Temple University in Philadelphia. I was 20 years old. I was taking liberal arts classes. I came from a poor working-class family: butcher shop. My mother and father hadn't graduated from high school and wanted me to go to college to complete their dreams. I, however, needed a dream of my own. So I decided to have one.

Let's back up. I had come from an abusive background, the background of people who grew up too poor and without enough resources or help, and who therefore took it out on their children.

Meanwhile, there I was at Temple University, wandering around campus and not knowing where I belonged.

I was taking courses in archaeology, which had always interested me. But this was also 1969. The Vietnam War was going on. People on campus were rallying against it and about the fact that Temple University was expanding into nearby poor neighborhoods, a move that would force mostly African-American tenants to find other similar housing in other places, more expensive places. Which was unlikely. My brother was in danger of being drafted, and I was only 20 years old and didn't know what to do. Didn't know if I had any power. A good friend of mine, whom I knew from working at the campus library, was a Communist. And I was being told things by her that my innocent family didn't know about and the news didn't talk about. That communist Vietnamese were being tortured by American military. (I was Jewish. This was a big deal.) And that our government was trying to take over a people who had long resisted other countries' efforts to control them—the issue of colonialization. I was innocent. What could I do? Probably a lot. But not yet. Do. What could I do. I was positively excited by all this, but also scared.

The year before, one of my best teachers in college, a former nun teaching a course in world religions, walked in wearing a black arm band the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. had been killed. The spring of 1968. I didn't understand it all, but wanted to understand it, and stayed after school that day and asked her to explain it to me. Why was this so important? I needed to understand it. Because I was Jewish and poor and working class and there were alarms going off in my head that this—King being killed, the war—were all wrong. But power is another issue.

So what? So what could I do? That's what people said about the Nazis.

So I walked. And walked. And walked off campus that summer. I walked over to a shopping center nearby, where a group of farmworkers were picketing an A&P. A friend of mine had been on strike that past year at the university. Secretaries organizing a union, and they had been followed and photographed by (this was frightening) a local CIA-like organization used by Frank Rizzo, the politically conservative police chief of Philadelphia. I had my own picture quietly taken outside Temple when I was hanging out with my friend while she was picketing. This scared me.

So, when I saw them picketing the supermarket, it wasn't new.

Carolina Franco was her name. And I remember to this day what she told me. That people would be picking crops in the fields all day and not be able to use a bathroom. How the women would have to make a circle around the woman who had to go, so she could have some privacy. Filthy, filthy conditions. Not treated with respect. They were things that made me angry, having been raised in a butcher shop, and all of that had been about working too hard. Overworking. Having to fight for survival. And usually not being respected.

Several days later, I went over and visited them at a place I knew my parents would hate. North Philadelphia. North of Temple, up Broad Street, and over to the east, in a very, very poor African-American and Puerto Rican neighborhood. Slums. It's not just that my parents were racist, I mean, we all are. It's just that they didn't want me to "go back" to where they had come from and were afraid that I would. Looking back at it all now, I have a bit more sympathy for their feelings. But it was my life, and I was floating with no focus in college. College just wasn't it then.

Also, being with people who were in Philadelphia on the boycott was like being with family. Very ordinary, caring, wonderful, powerful and connected people. Anger was there too, but not the anger to harm. And people whom I did not know simply let me, a stranger, into their lives and trusted me with them. Talked with me about their lives, their families, and their hopes. That was a difference, emotionally, from some of the experiences I had growing up. So I—this young, scared woman—was about to become a person who cared about the world (I always had!). I had a political persuasion and it sure wasn't conservative.

The three women on the boycott at that time were Carolina Franco (later Vasquez), Hope Lopez (the leader), and Tonia Saludado. They all had many pieces of wisdom, along with organizing skills, that came out through my contact with them that year. Their caring about people, any people, was intense. It was a kind of love about themselves, each other, and the world that was palpable. So when people criticized the boycott, came up with "information" saying the farmworkers were lying about the conditions and the wages, etc., that was just so wrong. And Hope, being a professional nurse, was just full of information about health issues. I remember to this day (it's funny how we remember those supposedly "small" things) Hope eating breakfast, slowly, and saying that if people just took their time to eat more slowly, they would not have to eat as much. We would digest food better. Would need less.

A lesson that would help me later on.

It is a health issue that many people I know deal with. I am beginning to be involved with a local neighborhood health group working on cultural and health issues, combined with community building. And one of the questions we have is: How do we relax and heal our bodies in a culture that is obsessed with speed and pushes many of us to overwork and ill health. How do we digest food better so that our bodies utilize the vitamins in our food better? Slow down.

What else helped me move into their lives and into the work was the sense, again, of being "invited in," which I knew from my family growing up. It is a cultural thing that not everyone knows how to do—invite others in.

Our discussions were about how to use the meager allowance of \$5 a week and room and board

when one wanted to smell clean and feel good about oneself, and when does it matter to one's health to get those things. Money matters.

This was like family.

I Do Matter - Body and Overwork

In deciding to write this essay, I had to look back to my late teens and early 20's, which took me into the union and the work I did, the wonderful things I learned. Yet, I have a lesson I'd like to share, because, despite all the good things that happened, wonderful people I met, incredible things I learned - and there were many of those - the process of becoming physically disabled began during my 4 years with the farmworkers movement. I have waves of emotion coming up for me by participating in this project. And some of it is anger, and a sense of worthlessness. Yet, I have shared with few people the circumstance of leaving, without saying, however, "you know, they did such great work, and I learned so much".....

This is what happened. I felt sort of let go of in that 4th year, because I was really sick - the feeling of being discarded when no longer of use. Again, these are FEELINGS. But I wound up in the hospital with a very serious illness that collapsed my body after those 4 years of over work and poor eating and sleeping on the boycott. With a history of chronic illnesses in my childhood, I realize now it was a mistake to do what I was doing in the way I was being asked to do it. I left in 1974. Sometime either early that year, or late 1973, I was living in Cincinnati on the boycott. I remember coming downstairs one morning after having woken up, in lots and lots of pain. My joints all over my body were swollen. The other boycotters (there were several of us living together) had already walked up the street to work, from where we lived on the 3rd floor of an apartment on Vine Street in Over-the-Rhine. I had to walk downstairs myself. My feet and ankles were swollen like grapefruit. I had experienced a lot of pain growing up, but this was too hard. I walked up the street (don't know how) to report in, and at some point was sent to, or driven to, a community clinic nearby. The clinic quickly put me in the hospital, and on an IV (intra-venous). I was physically out of it, and sort of groggy for the next few days, but I have the distinct feeling of having been left alone by the crew of the boycott. This could be inaccurate, but that's the sense. They, the doctors, diagnosed me with this strange disease called sarcoidosis. They didn't know what caused it, and didn't ask me if I knew, but that's when some of my anger about western medicine started really building up. If they had asked me I would have said, "stupid, this was caused by exhaustion!" Years later I realized that I was probably undernourished as well.

I was put on high doses of aspirin, enough that after several days I started having ringing in my ears. Some friends came to visit me, I recall, people who were boycott supporters, members of a religious lay order of women from Spain who did social change work. I was hospitalized for 2 weeks. I also know that this illness was so serious that they took x-rays of my liver, my lungs, my brain, because sarcoidosis can cause dangerous lesions in these organs. Thank goodness, there were no lesions.

I eventually was released from the hospital, and believe I stayed temporarily at the boycott home I had lived in. But I could barely walk. I remember trying to walk with a friend in a park somewhere nearby months later, and the terrible arthritis I had developed in my legs and feet, hands and wrists. I had not had this before. I wasn't able to work. I might have gone back to the office and tried at some point, but recovering - never completely recovering - took months. Another medically messy

part of the physical problem was the doctors' disbelief of what I knew about my body, and lack of informing me as a patient of medical risks caused more problems. I was sent to a doctor who put me on Prednisone. Which pretty soon caused ulcers. I had not been told the possible side-effects of steroids like Prednisone, which later I found out could be much more serious than just ulcers.

There was a feeling of hopelessness and despair about all of this. I eventually wound up living with one of the boycott supporters from the Spanish lay group I mentioned. I don't know how I survived after that, just can't remember. I didn't want to leave the boycott - yet had to. The most concrete memory I have is of feeling worthless. I have this memory of people feeling sorry for me, and a sense of shame from them about this. I mean, everything had collapsed. My body. My life. My meaning in life had just disappeared. I had nothing, and no real community outside the boycott to fall back on, except the supporters. My family was out east, but because of family problems, I couldn't go back there.

I eventually got well enough (but never completely well) to find some miscellaneous work. Things like painting children's furniture at a church. Finding ways to pick up and do something to survive, so built into me. And because I had learned this wonderful skill in the union about networking with people, having the ability to do "cold-calls" - just talk to people and ask around to try to find work, that skill came in real handy. So did my relationships with boycott supporters. But I felt cut off by people in the union. I had been of use, and was no longer of use, emotionally or physically.

So, I have some left-over anger about that, and perhaps disappointment would be a better word that people who were so concerned about health issues of workers, the overuse and abuse of farmworkers, could not get this. And when I have thought about it, and my refusal since then, in any working situation, to let myself be sent down a path of physical illness due to overwork - I knew how sick I still was and vulnerable to relapse (refusing to work overhours once cost me a another good job doing change work) - I feel like I have been rebelling to very typical worker situations in so many places, where people are asked to place their bodies on the line. But perhaps, I wonder if the farmworkers movement was simply doing to people what was done to them. Farmworkers used up until they breakdown and are thrown out.

As a disabled person I am looking at issues of being "thrown out" by society because we are no longer "worth it." Nonetheless it's a difficult decision to make when you need work done certain ways and people can't do what you need. I'm sure there are both sides to this. In hind sight, I believe that the farmworkers movement was under such duress to survive and succeed, that people's lives were so hard, and things so desperate, that it was absolutely the best thinking people had at the time about what to do with us volunteers when we were no longer useful in the way they needed, and that leaders did not feel like they had any other options other than to seriously overwork people. I am beginning to speak out on disability issues, and I am talking with long-term activists in the disability movement. One question I have asked is, what do you believe causes disability oppression? The answer I've gotten is two: the inability to ask for help in western cultures (it's not considered OK); and capitalism. Productivity in capitalism is based on using people's minds and bodies to make profit, and dehumanize people at the same time. Why then do progressive organizations doing change work not make this connection?

I am working with an organization here in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, called the Powderhorn/Phillips Cultural Wellness Center. Started by an African-American woman with years of experience in the health field and with community building, she developed a new theory on

building community across cultures, based on wellness, on good health. They believe that lots of people are sick because, among other things, we are separated from our cultures of origin. We know that this happens, many times, because of oppression. They also believe that all of our cultures (Native American/Indigenous cultures; African; Latina/o; Asian/Pacific Islander; Jewish; European), all have information about what allows people to be healthy, live healthy lives. We only have to go back to those cultures and study them to remember what we used to know, and sometimes have forgotten. Some of this information is about how respectfully people with disabilities, and elders, are treated in traditional cultures.

As an example, a couple years ago I went to a presentation by an African healer, educator and shaman named Malidoma Some' who is known internationally. Someone in the audience asked him how disabled children were treated in his tribal culture. He responded, that disabled people, all disabled people, are treated like shrines, and given lots of physical space. I felt this sense of respect from him, the sense that we are treated as resources of hope and wisdom, and I just cried hearing him say this.

This brings up the issue of what models of living, of work and community we use, as we make change in the world. Even under extreme circumstances. Do we really believe that when a human being is not able to do the work of the majority, that they should be discarded?.....What about the richness of information and resource which people have? What about the ability of human beings to think, even when aspects of their bodies, or their minds, don't work the same? What "value", a tricky word, or significance, do we each have as precious human beings? These last few years, as I've become poorer, and have been forced to the outskirts of society due to disability, I've had to fight to stay alive and believe that I am worth it.

So, that's my story. One of the reasons I am disabled, honestly, is because of that breakdown of my body that happened back in the 70's. It just kept getting worse, and eventually broke down completely several years ago. Partly, this was also because, despite my brush with serious illness, I still didn't listen to my body for many years afterward, and ignored pain, I ate badly, etc, until things got ultra critical and my back started collapsing and I contracted a couple full-blown chronic illnesses. Yet I know that people in the boycott cared about and still care deeply about all human beings, or we would not have done this work. And I learned in the boycott about really caring about others outside of myself or my own group. And learned immense life lessons. The question I ask is, how do we care about ourselves and each other's welfare under extreme circumstances, and in the process of making change? Why have many of us believed that change-making, and taking care of our health, are incompatible?

One other thing you may want to know about was my decision not to publicly criticize the union for this experience with my illness. I have found that leaders, good leaders, nonetheless get attacked and criticized. And the union was constantly being attacked by the other side, people with destructive agendas. And I didn't, even back in 1974 when I left, didn't want to criticize the union because, despite my feelings about the circumstances of leaving, I felt the work was exceptional and heart-inspiring and rewarding. People in the union taught me much. Union leaders, leaders of causes, are not infallible. No one is; they are human. We all are. Also, I wonder if many of us know how to support leaders, yet also help them think through alternative ways of doing things.

But I share this with hope that we will all learn how to make change, keep the faith, and keep doing

it without hurting ourselves or each other, physically or emotionally. That is what I now try to tell people doing political work: if you burn yourself out by not taking care of your mind and body, you are no longer able to do the work! Can you find a way to not burn out, and be doing the work a lot longer? Long-term thinking about this stuff seems hard (as it is for me!) when dealing with survival issues.

Peace. Be well!