

Book Review: Walk With Us

Contributed by Wendy Calimag, MSW

Book review of Walk With Us {mosgoogle right}

Walk with Us: Triplet Boys, Their Teen Parents, and Two White Women Who Tagged Along, by Elizabeth K. Gordon, Crandall, Dostie, & Douglass Books, Inc., Roselle, NJ, 2007, 311 pages, \$19.95.

"I was waking up to my membership in the dominant majority; I was hearing a call to change and to work for change." Elizabeth K. Gordon's quote from the introduction to her book provides insight into her journey as a white, Quaker, lesbian living in North Philadelphia who opens her home to a 15-year-old Muslim, African American girl, Tahija, who is pregnant with triplets. In her story, Elizabeth, known as Kathryn in the book, examines her "membership in a dominant majority" as she helps Tahija, her boyfriend Lamarr, and the babies. As a self-identified Reparationist, she is motivated to repair the damage of racial hatred and sees helping the teenagers as a way to do so. In her book, the reader is witness to how the author's self-awareness and motivation influences her decisions and relationships, especially with Tahija and eventually the triplets. She bravely shares her insights and inner struggles as she strives to create a better life for this young family.

Although her self-awareness is her strength, Kathryn's motivation to work for change seems to hinder her relationship with Tahija. To her, providing a better life for Tahija and the children is an opportunity for her to address racial injustices. By approaching their relationship in this manner, Kathryn finds difficulty developing a trusting relationship with Tahija; setting boundaries, defined roles, and clear expectations; and creating a mutual understanding between them. Eventually, Kathryn alienates and undermines Tahija and Lamarr's role as parents, and Kathryn finds herself unable to help the babies and fulfill her own needs.

This, however, puts Kathryn on a road to self-discovery. She starts to see how her reparationist views are a mask for the shame she feels for racial injustices created by the dominant culture to which she belongs. Also, she concludes that she practices a form of racism by using people, such as Tahija, as a "subconscious drive to redeem" herself. At the end of her story, she is able to reconcile her relationship with Tahija and Lamarr as she better understands the true meaning of the words "walk with us" and accepts that the triplets would have been better helped if she had not allowed her personal motivations to take priority.

Kathryn's examination of herself as part of a dominant majority or privileged group is an excellent example of the process social workers should undergo to ensure that they are respecting a client's right to self-determination. Also, the story shows how one's personal desires can hinder a helping relationship, similar to that of a social worker to a client. Kathryn's desire to right the wrongs of her dominant culture is her motivation to help Tahija and the babies, and she decides for herself the best parenting approach, one that is opposite of Tahija and Lamarr's. Kathryn continually pushes her wishes on the teenage couple, which results in the opposite effect of what Kathryn fights against, an assertion of her power.

I would recommend this book to any social worker, student, and educator. The topics covered in Kathryn's story are important for discussion and self-exploration. For social work students, it is an example of how our motivations for entering the profession and our personal values may impede our relationships with clients. For seasoned social workers, it is a reminder of the need for continued self-exploration, so we can continue to be effective in our roles. Educators will find the story useful in starting discussions around cultural competency, communication, and social work ethics. Important discussion questions can be found on the book's Web site at <http://www.walkwithus.info>.

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