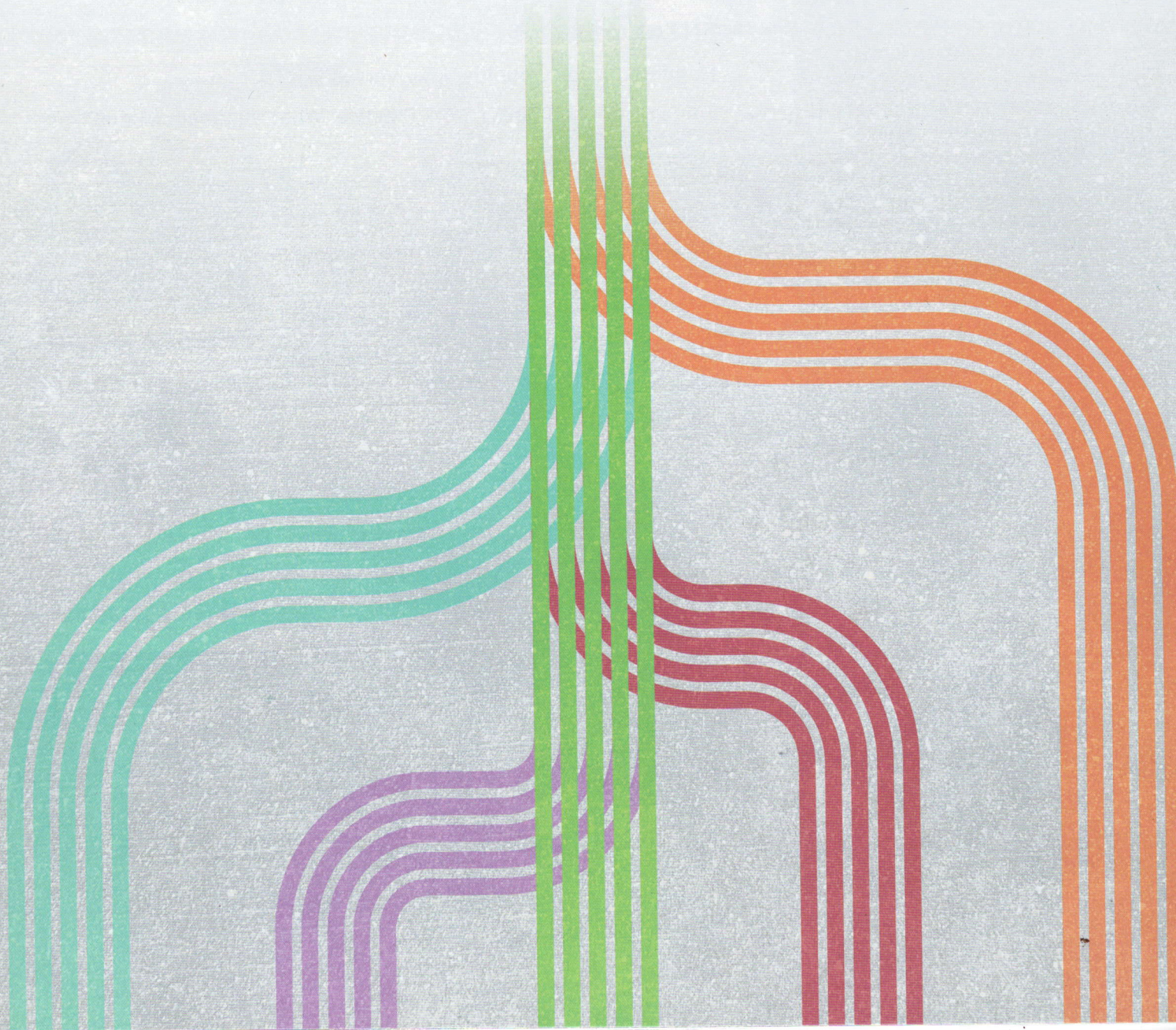




ACSW CONFERENCE 2020

# INTERSECTIONS OF ACTIVISM AND LEADERSHIP

BY MEL PRIESTLEY





**T**HROUGHOUT HER THREE DECADES AS AN ACTIVIST AND CLINICAL COUNSELLOR, Vikki Reynolds, MA, PhD, RCC, has focused on building bridges between frontline work and social movements. Reynolds is an adjunct professor at City University in Vancouver and a registered clinical counsellor with a strong background in political activism and clinical counselling. She is focused on social change and offers up her own career and writings as examples of how those in the helping profession can apply a lens of activism to their practice, which in turn transforms the ways they interact with clients and the system.

Reynolds is one of the keynote speakers at the Alberta College of Social Worker's 2020 conference. The other is Todd Leader, RPsych, RSW, a faculty member at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, and a psychologist and registered social worker. Leader has had a markedly different career than Reynolds, yet also focuses on reframing social work, particularly through the concept of leadership and redesigning systems to be truly client-centred.

Together, the pair will offer conference attendees two very different, but equally intriguing, entry points into this year's theme: Connect. Explore. Grow.

#### Changing the Context

"I identify as an activist," says Reynolds at the start of our conversation. "That's a way better way to understand me."

Listening to Reynolds speak, even just over the phone, is captivating. Throughout the conversation, she weaves together various tangents from her vivid and varied career, which includes leading wilderness trips with criminalized youth based on the Outward Bound model; running Amnesty International's campaign against the death penalty in the United States; teaching in Botswana while the neighbouring Republic of South Africa was under a state of emergency; and providing clinical supervision and therapy for refugees and survivors of torture,

mental health and substance misuse counsellors, and rape crisis counsellors.

"When I became a therapist, it never made sense to me to see people as traumatized or as somehow broken internally," Reynolds says. "I always knew the problem was in the social world because we haven't delivered on a just society."

She describes herself as a "lapsed" trauma therapist who approaches therapeutic work as solidarity work. Instead of seeking the criteria of pathology or brokenness within individuals, Reynolds instead situates herself as a political witness to them.

"When you bear witness as an activist, it means that you actually have to do something with what you hear – you can't hide behind professional ideas of confidentiality and neutrality," she says. "You have to actually take a position for justice and try to change the context in which these social horrors occur."

Changing the context of the system has also been a key part of Todd Leader's career. Unlike most registered social workers with a psychology background, he has never worked as a clinician.

"My interest has always been in looking at broader systems and how we create systems, programs and services that really meet people's needs in the ways that they need them to," Leader says.

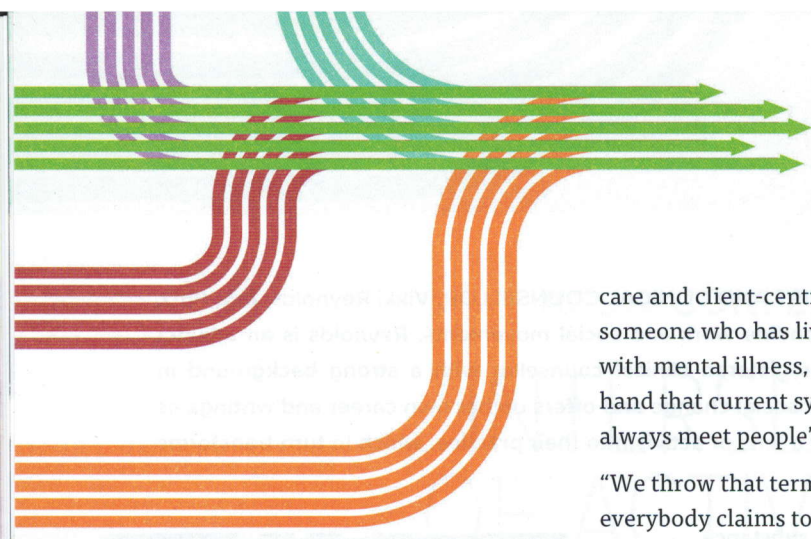


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VIKKI REYNOLDS

Having spent much of his career in health care leadership positions, Leader has had lots of opportunities to create and design programs. "In my early years, sometimes they were good and sometimes they sucked," he says with a laugh. "I paid attention to the things that worked and in the later stages of my career, I started to look at the administrative side of our organizations and challenge whether or not they are really client-centred."

Leader's experience with these matters is obvious from the quiet confidence that he exudes in conversation, as well as the





informative yet down-to-earth ways that he talks about them.

One of his biggest successes was working with a team to redesign a mental health and addiction program in such a way that it was indeed centred on the client, in a way that had not previously been seen. He wrote about this experience in his 2016 book, *It's Not About Us: The Secret to Transforming the Mental Health and Addiction System in Canada*.

"Clients regularly expressed relief and gratitude at being able to get access to help in a timely way," he explains. "They expressed feeling respected when we would listen to their concerns and then actually make system changes based on their individual experiences. They showed a greater sense of safety and comfort with the idea of ending treatment, because they knew they could get back in, within a reasonable time, if they needed to in future. Previously, there was a norm of trying to stay an active client because they knew they would have to wait for a long time to be seen again if their health deteriorated. Adolescents felt respected and valued because the services came to them, and did not feel abnormal or stigmatized, because the services included low-level, early-intervention counselling and support instead of just therapy."

Leader explains that there's a huge difference between client-centred

care and client-centred systems. As someone who has lived experience with mental illness, he knows first-hand that current systems do not always meet people's needs.

"We throw that term around a lot – everybody claims to be client-centred, but much of the time the programs simply aren't," Leader says. "They meet the needs of politicians and finance directors and management. There's a world of difference between client-centred care, which we hear about all the time, and a client-centred system."

"In the mental health field, we're seeing more jurisdictions investing in more walk-in clinics and same-day mental health support – that's a client-centred approach," he continues. "Anybody who has experienced mental illness knows that when you need help, you need help now. Getting an appointment for next month or three months from now does not help in any way. There's no point even giving that appointment; it serves no purpose."

Leader challenges those in the helping professions to examine the systems that they work within.

"The real primer question is: are the systems that you work within client-centred?" he says. "And if they aren't, how do we get there? What are the key things we need to do as individual professionals in order to make that change?"

### **Courage and resistance**

Becoming frustrated with systems is something that both Reynolds and Leader have encountered. Each of them acknowledges that sticking tightly to your ethics is a critical piece of this work, as well as finding your

own unique way of making changes for the better.

"The question that organizes me is how to be of use," Reynolds says. "I'm always asking people, 'What's the best use of you? Where can you make change?' I think the way to stay useful is to do ethical work and to be in places where you can make change. There are many paths to liberation and many ways to make change. Everybody, where they are, can enact justice."

To that end, Reynolds took a leave of absence from her position as adjunct professor at City University in September 2019. She travelled to various centres across Canada to work with professionals, including social workers, grappling with the opioid crisis. That's where she was needed at that time, she says, rather than in the classroom.

Throughout his career, Leader has seen how the system itself can shift people's priorities – particularly when they enter management positions. He says it's vital that people remain focused on why they got into social work in the first place, and for leaders especially to be courageous yet diplomatic.

"We need people in leadership roles who are comfortable making waves and who are ready to argue that our job is to put the client before the organization," he says. "We need leaders that have the courage to stand up and take on that fight – and to have the skill to be able to do it without getting fired."

"Anybody can be a pain in the ass about an issue," he continues with a chuckle. "It takes a particular type of courage and diplomacy to be able to



challenge the hierarchy, to challenge the system effectively but without necessarily torpedoing your career.”

Leader’s views on leadership align with Reynolds’ work on solidarity and resistance. Like Leader, Reynolds speaks of her training work as creating cultures of accountability to shift work team culture from staff-centred teams to client-centred teams.

“Nobody changes anything alone, which is why I talk about my work as a supervision of solidarity,” she says. “Find out who is in solidarity with you and who is already resisting the structures of oppression. Find the people who you can start to have dialogues with and shift things from where you’re standing – and not in any grand way, like taking down the death penalty [in the U.S.].”

“We didn’t take the death penalty down, you know,” she continues, reflecting on her past work. “I never saved one guy from death row, but that doesn’t mean it was a waste of time. It was very meaningful and useful. My resistance was that every one of those men was treated like a human being – by me. That changes how people die.”

#### Justice-doing

It was around the 1990s when Reynolds says she really noticed a shift in the way that people approached activism and social movements. And while she worked in many different areas of activism and clinical counselling, it all came back to the same core principles.

“Around the 90s, it got really interesting when people started to do intersectional analysis and realized that you have to approach oppression on all fronts,” she

explains. “All the work I’ve done is the same work. It’s all about not delivering on a just society. When you’re qualified as a psychotherapist, you have these ideas about addiction, mental illness and trauma. But for me, this is all about colonization and the interface of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, ableism – all of that stuff. So for me, this work only makes sense from a justice-doing kind of lens.”



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Intersection has played a key role in Leader’s work too, particularly the intersection between leadership and client-centredness. He sees this as the only way to create a more functional collaboration between different organizations and even between different departments of the same large organization. That’s how to overcome the “us versus them” mentality that’s still so pervasive, and instead focus on what’s best for the client.

“For me, this is about ethics and values,” Leader says. “It’s about what we believe is right and finding ways to stand up for it. A public service exists to serve the public as the top priority – not as a secondary thought. It’s not, ‘We’ll serve people’s unmet needs if we have enough money left in our budget,’

“We are not failing to hire good people in these public sector programs,” he continues. “We have many brilliant, selfless, empathic, skilled social workers, nurses, doctors, psychologists. They got into this work for the right reasons. But they end up working in systems that don’t allow them to do things in the way that they believe is right. That’s the part that I’ve been working to change.”



MEL PRIESTLEY is an Edmonton-based freelance journalist who writes about local news and culture as well as theatre, food and wine. She also hosts a weekly podcast about Edmonton theatre called Ghost Light. Find more of her writing and current projects at [melpriestley.ca](http://melpriestley.ca).