

In a Special Section on *Personal Narratives on Activism for Social Justice and Systems Transformation*

Reflections of an Asian Woman Human Rights and Social Action Warrior

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Why Human Rights and Social Action and Not A Doctor?

I was once told by a White male friend that I had three strikes against me: 1) being an Asian, 2) being female and 3) growing up in a British colony. I grew up in a traditional Chinese family where the sole ambition for girls was to get married into a respectful family. Girls getting an education were not viewed as a top priority, and if you were going to get an education then you should be doing a degree in law, medicine, or engineering. It was difficult for my parents to understand why I did a degree in psychology since compared to a doctor, a psychologist has lower status and receives significantly less income. Ironically, it was the values that were instilled by my parents that led me into psychology, human rights, social justice, and social action.

I did not realize that my social injustice lesson came at such an early age until recently. I was watching a television show where someone was doing an exercise about earliest memories. At that time I thought, "What a great exercise". So I began to think about my earliest memory. My earliest memory was a wonderful memory of holding my grandfather's hand and only being able to see his knee as I was learning how to walk. That warm memory suddenly shifted to confusion and pain. As we walked to the door of our family's fruit shop I saw my parents and aunts and uncles serving the White customers. I was probably around 18 months and did not understand the interaction between my family members and the customers. But one thing was clear, even at 18 months, I was aware that it was painful to witness the demeaning, sniggering, patronizing, and belittling behavior exhibited by the White customers to my family. This was my first memory! Unfortunately, it would not be my last memory of racism and oppression.

From that time until now my family and I have had numerous experiences of racism, discrimination, and oppression. For example, my father, as a young adult, was denied entry in a movie theatre since the sign outside stated: *No dogs or Chinese*, or the time when my sister was told that she would not be the valedictorian. The school principal harshly told my sister: *"We all know that you're the best student in the school, but we can't give this status to a Chinese"*. The repeated messages of being inferior to White people and not even seen as being part of the human race were strongly imprinted in my mind. I still have vivid memories of being thirteen years old and my history teacher lecturing to our class about World War II. Being the only student of color in the class I was tense throughout the class, knowing fully that there would be discussion about the Japanese participation in World War II. My main concern was that the White students would think that I was Japanese. Well that was the least of my concerns. When the history teacher asked the class: *"Why do you think Chinese are yellow?"* I knew immediately that this was not going to be a positive response. The history teacher then proudly announced to the class that: *"During World War II the Chinese men did not want their women and girls to be raped, so they put them in the barrels when people would urinate in and hence they became yellow"*. Readers may already be familiar with these countless stories of racism and oppression since these are the experiences of many people of color and have been told in various outlets such as in movies, plays, books, narratives, poems, songs, dance, etc.

Despite these injustices, my parents who were both unaccompanied refugee minors in a British colony based on their experiences of World War II, have instilled in my siblings and me the core values of being humble, always helping those who are less fortunate than you, treating everyone respectfully regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, disability age, etc., and not be judgmental, selfish, arrogant, or egocentric. Coming from a Confucius and Buddhist background we were taught the yin-yang approach to social injustices, where we were educated to be open, empathic, humble, and learn the art of forgiveness. We learned not to complain about being ridiculed or about the discrimination, inequalities, or unfair treatment that we experienced. Some may interpret this as passive acceptance, but the Asian approach, which I did not understand until I was older, is that from acceptance comes harmony, balance, and energy to strategize on how to effectively combat these injustices.

Being an immigrant and living in a migrant community I became a cultural and language broker for newly arrived Chinese immigrants and Southeast Asian refugees. Not surprisingly, my personal experiences led me to help my community with the aim to minimize racism, discrimination, and oppression so that the next generation would not have to endure such injustices. To understand more about my experiences and those of my family and community I decided to do a degree in psychology. Through psychological concepts, theories, and models of racism, hatred, prejudice, discrimination, stereotypes, forgiveness, liberation psychology, and restorative justice, it gave me the tools, skills, and courage to combat human rights violations and social injustices. My experiences define who I am, what I stand for, and what I am willing to fight for.

Since I was a child I fought for human rights and social justice so it naturally evolved into my professional work as a psychologist. My name is Chi-Ying, literally translated, bestowed from heaven courage; she who courageously endures nature's hardships by harmonizing with her environment (Aria & Gon, 1992). It is my karma to have experienced and endured racism, discrimination, and oppression and will continue to do so. But it is also my karma to learn from

my experiences and to move out of my traditional Chinese woman's role to take a leadership role and proactively combat human rights violations and social injustices. And it is my karma to weave my Asian cultural values and teachings into social action, blending the yin and yang of knowledge and action. I do not have special skills nor am I different than other people, all I have is my passion and commitment to fight against the injustices and human rights violations I encounter, for I cannot and will not be silent about these injustices. Below is my humble story of my lessons learned as an Asian woman fighting for rights and fair treatment for *all* people.

Eight Key Lessons Learned as an Asian Woman Social Justice Warrior

Patience, Perseverance, Tenacity, Creativity, Flexibility, Compassion, Forgiveness and Hope: these are the eight key lessons I have learned in doing social justice and human rights work. The successful outcome of social justice work does not necessarily happen within days, weeks, or months. This may take years. I truly believe in the *planting seed* analogy. Part of social action work is sometimes about planting seeds. I have learned to be patient and trust that what I am doing will be effective and will lead to change -- change that I may never witness. Instead of dwelling on whether I can make a difference, I trust and have faith that I can make a difference. For example, I am endlessly surprised and humbled by emails, cards, or letters I receive from students and community members about the impact of our interactions and the change that has developed as a result of their contact with me. Since the eight key points have impacted my social justice work, below I will share examples of how each of these eight critical lessons affected me personally and professionally.

Patience, Perseverance, and Tenacity

No one said that social justice work is easy. Change is hard for most people. The Chinese word for crisis translates into *danger and opportunity* which describes the difficulty and essence of change for people and systems. Change represents a sense of fear and danger. Danger and fear of the unknown. Therefore, to do social action work requires patience with perseverance and tenacity. One cannot give up fighting against social injustices. It is all too easy to give up. When I feel that I do not have the energy or time to do social justice work I am reminded of the people I met after Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (Burma) in May 2008. The young man I worked with who lost his entire family or the young boy who told me that while he was looking for his family member he began counting the dead bodies and gave up after he counted 200. Both of them, even with their recent experience of family members dying and total destruction of their entire village, volunteered at a local INGO (International Nongovernmental Organization) to help protect orphaned minors who have lost or were separated from their families as a result of Cyclone Nargis. The courage, strength and resilience they displayed provide me with the strength to persevere, be tenacious, and patient when fighting for social justice and human rights.

Creativity and Flexibility

Thinking out of the box and being creative and flexible is another lesson I have learned. Working with refugee families and trying to educate the host community and accessing services for this population is a challenge. Going through traditional mainstream channels does not necessarily result in positive outcomes. So, there is a need to think creatively about how to ensure that this population receives fair treatment and equal access to resources and

opportunities. For example, after spending numerous hours trying to educate social services, health and mental health professionals, teachers, and social service providers about culturally responsive practices for refugees I realized that I was not getting anywhere. No one was willing to listen. They wanted to just quickly fix the problem. They believed that refugees were adjusting well to their resettlement country since newspaper articles showed pictures of refugees wearing Western clothes, and standing outside their new homes.

Frustrated with this myth, which partly was created and reinforced by the media, and the lack of understanding, awareness and willingness by education, social, health and mental health professionals to be culturally responsive, I decided to use the same source that created this misperception to fight against the erroneous view. I decided to use the media as a tool towards social action. Looking through the major newspapers I identified a journalist who appeared to be aware of the postmigration challenges of refugees. I made contact with the journalist and asked if he was willing to write a more accurate account of the postmigration challenges of refugees. After some negotiations the journalist agreed to write the story. We (the refugee community, the journalist, and I) collectively agreed that the journalist would write a series of articles over a period of several months, since one article would not be enough to create the desired impact. The articles would focus not only on the challenges, but also on the strength and resilience of this population and the contributions refugees were making in their communities. As the result of the newspaper articles I was approached by the Departments of Health, Education, and Social Services to conduct a series of workshops and training to health and mental health professionals, social services, and other care providers regarding culturally responsive services for refugees.

Another situation presented itself that also required being creative. The Asian refugees and immigrants that I worked with had a traditional approach to health and mental health. Coining has been used as a method of healing. Coining is the use of a coin to rub on the person's body, resulting in marks or bruises on the person's body. These marks have been misinterpreted by mainstream Western health and mental health and educational professionals as signs of abuse. I had been asked numerous times by the Asian community to assist in situations where child had been removed from their parent's home because teachers mistakenly identified the marks of coining as physical abuse or physicians seeing coining marks on an elderly person and labeled it as elderly abuse.

As a result of constant education of service and care providers about coining, I thought an effective way of reaching a larger group of people would be to produce a video on coining. Not having any funds or skills to produce the video I called video production companies found in the yellow pages and asked if they would be willing to provide their services for free. Eventually, I was able to convince a company to produce the video free of cost, and worked in collaboration with the refugee community and the video company to produce a 10 minute video on coining that was distributed to schools, hospitals, child protective services, public health services, social services, law enforcement, teacher education, health and mental health university training programs. The aim of the video was to educate service and care providers about the cultural healing method to prevent the misinterpretation of this traditional healing technique as abuse.

Compassion and Forgiveness

A difficult lesson for me in human rights violations and social injustices is to have compassion and forgiveness for social injustice perpetrators. I have learned from the survivors of injustices and human rights violations the difficult, yet valuable lesson of forgiveness and compassion. It is not for me to judge others, but to understand the behaviors and motivation in why and how people participate and engage in injustices. If the survivors I worked with can forgive and have compassion for their perpetrators then I as a social justice psychologist and counselor also need to have those qualities. Working with survivors of torture or women who have experienced multiple rapes and sexual abuse and yet have the ability to forgive has been an invaluable lesson in forgiveness, true kindness, and an authentic sense of humanity. Therefore, I too as a social justice counselor and psychologist must embrace the value of forgiveness and compassion of everyone.

Hope

A major lesson I have learned is the degree of hope individuals have, as well as, the need for psychologists and counselors to instill hope in individuals. Time and time again working with refugees who have survived genocide, and the atrocities and traumas of war, human trafficking survivors or individuals, families, and communities who have survived natural disasters, such as, the Tsunami, Cyclone Nargis, Hurricane Katrina or the Wildfires in San Diego I am always surprised and humbled by the degree of hope and resiliency of survivors of social injustice. For example, driving up to the Indian reservation in San Diego when a large portion of the reservation was totally destroyed by the 2007 wildfires, there was a painted sign at the entry of the reservation saying: *We Believe in Miracles*. The same degree of hope was also witnessed in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. Driving to areas most severely hit by Hurricane Katrina I saw signs on the road that said: *Together, We will rebuild our community, Together, We will support each other, Together, We will lead the way*.

Outcome research attributes 15% of successful counseling to hope. Having witnessed the degree of hope in those who have survived natural disasters, war and other oppressions I would say hope is at least 65% of successful outcome. Contributing to hope and resiliency is critical for the counselors and psychologists who are doing social action work to have hope in their clients, their families and communities, as well as, the ability to instill hope.

Incorporating the Eight Lessons Learned into Current Social Justice Action

Current International Social Justice Action

Currently, I am working with survivors of human trafficking in Asia. This involves girls who have been trafficked into the commercial sex industry. This work also includes looking at child protection issues. Working with human trafficking survivors promotes the same themes of resiliency, strength, hope, and forgiveness. I had the privilege to be asked by an INGO to work on prevention of child trafficking and child protection. For the past three years I have worked in urban cities and rural villages in Myanmar (Burma) where there are minimal resources. Sometimes, I am in villages without electricity, running water, and bathrooms, etc. In these villages the people have never seen anyone who is not Burmese. The living conditions are primitive. People sleep on mats on the wooden floor. Some huts just have a roof and no walls

or doors. Not being a fan of camping, this experience has led me to put aside my personal comforts in life and focus on the purpose of my work.

I have been holding meetings with the villagers that consist of 100 to 400 people on issues of trafficking and child protection. For some villagers this is the first time they have heard of these concepts, although human trafficking and child abuse and violence are widespread. Patience, perseverance, tenacity, flexibility, and creativity are needed in educating illiterate people, who are living in constant and extreme high poverty, who are living on the edge of civilization, and who are regularly beating and selling their children. The INGO has taught the children to use theatre as a way of bringing awareness and education to their parents and members of the villages. As the children acted out their experiences to the entire village there are always many tears and emotions. This is the first time children have voiced to their parents, elders, and members of the village, their experiences of violence, trafficking, and abuse. Utilizing my cross-cultural skills in communication, group dynamics and group process I am working in collaboration with the children and village members about furthering awareness and prevention and intervention of child trafficking, child labor, and violence.

The following is an example of the powerful result of the children doing social justice theatre to educate their parents and village members. After the children perform their social justice theatre, we (the children, village members, INGO staff, and myself) sit on the ground for hours as I facilitate brainstorming of how parents could stop beating their children. Mothers are sitting around crying since they did not realize the effects of their beatings had on their children. We all talk and share what could parents do positively if their children are naughty. Children share their ideas with their parents about what they believe could be effective discipline and give suggestions on how parents could interact with them if they are naughty without beatings. Leaving the village there were promises of child protection rather than child neglect and abuse. This all takes patience and the results are not necessarily immediate. After a period of time, going back to the village, a mother who had not realized the effects of beating on her child, told me in front of the entire village: "*I no longer beat my child 5 times a day, I only beat him 3 times a day*". For the child, the mother, and the villagers that was progress. Both mother and child have hope that things will be different. The child forgives the mother on all the previous severe beatings he endured and now promises that he would try to be a good child. This was a lesson for the entire village.

The mother is now talking to other parents about alternative ways of releasing anger and frustration and not beating their children. There is collective hope, collective forgiveness in the village, children in the village are given a voice, both adults and children know the CRC (U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child) and there is a collective genuine intention on implementing the CRC at the village level. A child protection committee was formed in the village that consists of elders, village members, and children to ensure that the CRC is upheld. This is just one example of how change can occur on an individual, family, and community levels as an outcome of social action. On a systematic level, in collaboration with the INGO we held meetings with village leaders, spiritual leaders, township authorities, the local police, and the Myanmar social welfare and health officers on prevention of child trafficking and child protection.

Current National Social Action Work

In the U.S., I have designed and teach a Master's Level course on social justice. This is a course taken by all the graduate students in the Master's program. This course is designed as a "hands-on" course. Each semester students are assigned social justice projects. These projects range from developing and implementing a tunnel of oppression on the university campus, working with the American Counseling Association Public Policy and Legislation Committee, developing a school counselor's gang prevention manual for the American School Counseling Association, collecting clothes for homeless shelters, food for food banks, collecting and making care packages for the troops in Iraq, and working in variety of nonprofit agencies on various social issues. Some examples include developing and assisting in a national conference on torture survivors, helping with an international conference on unaccompanied minors and vulnerable children, working with the refugee elderly populations, creating a job fair for immigrants which includes resume writing, interview skills and career counseling, and developing a community resource booklet for immigrants, etc.

Also working with my colleague Dr. Fred Bemak who established the *Counselors Without Borders* I have had the opportunity to co-lead and supervise groups of students in doing post-disaster work, such as, working with survivors of Hurricane Katrina and working on the Indian Reservations and Latino/a migrant communities after the San Diego Wildfires. This work with *Counselors Without Borders* and the Social Justice course aims to instill in the next generation of counselors and psychologists a multicultural social justice action approach in their work.

Importance of Disseminating Social Action Work

It is also critical that as social action counselors and psychologists we also disseminate our work through various types of scholarship from professional journal articles, books, videos, community newsletters, as well as give presentations both in professionals organizations and community venues, such as in nonprofit organizations, churches, schools, etc. It is important that the work we do is shared with our colleagues, government and state officials, policymakers, other professionals and the public. Part of doing social justice and human rights work is to educate. With the age of technology our work can be disseminated in a variety of sources. I have had the opportunity to give numerous local, national and international presentations, and published extensively about my work. Through my publications and presentations I have had the fortune of receiving many invitations, such as being invited to do a presentation at the United Nations (U.N.) in New York on trafficking of Asian girls into the commercial sex industry, or being invited by the American Psychological Association to participate in the APA Expert Summit on Immigration and the APA training video on working with immigrants. As a result of the U.N. presentation I was asked to publish my presentation in a professional journal, as well as, I was offered a book contract on the same topic. This "snowballing" of social justice action work frequently happens when anyone of us engaged in this type of social justice projects.

The work that I have done with the trafficking survivors and child protection has made me again rethink about the Western theories, models, and interventions. For example, I am now currently writing a manuscript on the theories of human growth and development and moral development from the perspectives of those living in constant extreme poverty. The Western concept of choice is another topic that I have presented on and I am currently writing about

with regards to trafficking survivors. It is critical to view social action not only as action with individuals, or in the community or changing systems, but also as action in terms of education by disseminating the work one does through presentations and scholarship.

In summary, these are just some of the examples of the change I am trying to create in our field of psychology and counseling as we educate the next generation of multicultural social justice psychologists and counselors. I hope my narrative has provided ideas for readers about how to move social justice and human rights knowledge to action. I pass on to readers the eight key valuable lessons I have learned from social action work: Patience, Perseverance, Tenacity, Creativity, Flexibility, Compassion, Forgiveness and Hope, and wish you well on your social action journey.

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