

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

The roots of social justice: The personal journey of a human rights advocate

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When I reflect on my lifetime work in social justice, I realize that the values and sense of action was simply part of my life from a young age. Although social justice was not the term that was used to characterize my earlier life, it was the essence of the values that I had been brought up with and espoused in my family. My grandfather, an immigrant from Russia, had been a union organizer, fighting for worker's rights. Interestingly, he maintained the values of concern and fairness for workers, even when he later became a manager and owned his own shoe factories. His beliefs and tenacity about fairness, equity, rights, human dignity, and privilege remained the heartbeat of my family ethos.

Along with my grandfather's core beliefs were my parents, who were young and rebellious. We learned not to care about material goods, enjoyed protest singers such as Pete Seeger, and learned about how to question things that did not make sense. One early experience where there was a clash with these values was in my sixth grade class. I was in the only advanced sixth grade class in the school. All the students in the advanced class knew we were different than other sixth graders and received constant messages that we were being primed for successful futures. It was clear to the entire school that those in the advanced class were identified as future leaders and were being given special treatment, special coursework, and special attention. Interestingly the teacher selected to teach us was a devout and overly zealous former marine officer, who saw very little beyond his U.S. military view of the world and U.S. philosophical, scientific, and military domination. An example of his worldview was his selection for the advanced class annual field trip. Rather than visit a famous museum, historical sites, fascinating work environments, or attend a cultural event (all of which were within one

hour of our school) he choose to visit the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, which was a ten hour roundtrip journey.

Already at the young age of eleven, I had been reading and thinking about the merits of socialism and communism that might be helpful to those less fortunate in U.S. society and had already identified my favorite magazine as *National Geographic*, and one of my favorite books as a Time/Life Book on *World Religions*, both of which provided a fascinating exposure to other cultures and diverse viewpoints. In class one day our sixth grade teacher was once again berating cultures, religions, and political thinking that was different from predominant U.S. thought of the day as "horrible, bad, and evil." Reflecting about my readings and discussions at home with my parents and thinking about my grandfather's Russian background, I raised my hand and shared a different point of view about other cultures. Questioning my teacher resulted in difficulties for me for the remainder of the school year. Despite being popular and having many friends, my teacher from that point on clearly felt that I would not make a "good marine" and should not be part of the club. The sense of devaluation and criticism did little to diminish my wonderful social network or critical thinking, laying a foundation for continued reflection, an even greater conviction for not taking statement as fact, and questioning that which did not make sense. This sixth grade experience set the tone.

Several years later in eleventh grade, I found myself in the midst of a controversy in my high school. All my classmates were complaining about the lunchroom food. While I was eating horribly tasting food filled with sugar and starch, I was also learning about leaders and heroes such as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and John F. Kennedy, who were fighting for civil rights and human rights. They were standing up to make a difference in worlds much larger than my high school. To top it off, astronauts had reached the moon so anything seemed possible. Leaders, change, rights, justice – all of these concepts were swirling around in my sixteen year old mind giving me a glimpse of higher mountains and the possibility of dreams actually coming true! With this in mind, and facing the daily dread of lunch with my classmates, I organized the first sit-in my high school to protest the lunch food. Amazingly I couldn't find one classmate who disagreed that we were eating horrible tasteless food and that "yes, we should do something about it!" Many of my peers joined in the protest, sitting in the high school campus courtyard refusing to go to class, testing the parameters of possibilities, and flexing our muscles to see if we might also be able to change the world. Very quickly an irate school administration squashed our protest, ordered students back to class under the threat of suspension, singled out the ring leaders (two others and me), called my parents, and angrily brought me to the office. With a serious threat of high school suspension hanging over my head, a new awareness about personal commitment to one's strongly felt beliefs and convictions, a sense of isolation (yes, my classmates all scurried back to class while I remained protesting), an evolving understanding about power in action, a new level of experiencing some of the *ins and outs* of leadership, and the accompanying knowledge that the cafeteria food was still fact horrible, I began to more clearly define what I believed in, what I stood for, and who I was as a person. As my classmates complained about their impotence and lack of ability to change things I was formulating my own path and sense of self as it related to fighting for equal rights, fairness, equity, and social justice.

Thus, my social justice march crystallized at the age of sixteen with bad food and autocratic administrators, as I began to learn lessons about social change, equality, equal rights, dignity, tolerance, and human rights. It is no surprise that I soon became involved in civil rights,

working with African American youth and families in Roxbury, Massachusetts during the late 1960s as a university student. My work in Roxbury accompanied protesting against civil rights violations and the Vietnam War, a personal refusal to fight in an unjust war in Vietnam, and working as a summer counselor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Upward Bound Program, which was a project that was part of JFK's national *War on Poverty*. Upward Bound was a fertile ground to live and breathe interracial understanding and tolerance and figure out how to create an intensive 8-10 week summer cross-cultural community residential program with low income academically failing Black, Hispanic, and White high school students, many of whom had never been in contact with people from other races or ethnicities. We were a microcosm community struggling with interracial tensions, Black Power, migrant Hispanic communities, English as a Second Language, the devastating effects of poverty, and generations of racism and discrimination as we worked daily with the struggles of the youth and staff in the program and our community's trials and tribulations.

After receiving my undergraduate degree I was invited to work full time in the Upward Bound Program, expanding the student focus of my summer counseling job to working with the families, communities, and schools, where on a daily basis I encountered issues of poverty, injustice, discrimination, and racism. Simultaneously I attended graduate school at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where I tried to meld the world of higher education with the daily realities of the Upward Bound experience. The merging of work life and graduate student life was fascinating. One day I would find myself in Washington, DC in meetings on Capital Hill to negotiate budget and project parameters, or in the University President's office talking about the program achievements and community initiatives. The next day I would be at a local community center in the inner city with Upward Bound students and their parents and grandparents to discuss advocacy strategies for their children at the local high school when they were denied services, resources, or enrollment access to college bound classes. In the middle of days like this, I would attend classes where many of my classmates had neither experience nor knowledge about the real workings of social justice, human rights, human dignity, multiculturalism, racism, or oppression.

Five years into this experience at the age of 26 I found myself as the youngest Upward Bound Project Director in the country with an earned doctoral degree. The Upward Bound experience set the stage for my life's work. Moving between high level national and state policy and budget meetings to grassroots organizing and community work became a necessary and critical skill to promote social change and the values of social justice that were now part of my being. Understanding differences, the pain and anger associated with injustice, the firm conviction to take risks, and the growing skills as a leader and advocate, were all formed during my years in Upward Bound. This experience was enriched by other major personal and professional journeys such as leaving Upward Bound and spending one year with a backpack traveling on local buses and trains in developing countries around the world on helped me gain a far deeper appreciation of cultural differences and a much broader worldview. Other experiences followed where I carried the same convictions and values such as directing a national mental health pilot community-based project for deinstitutionalized youth, assuming the position as the Clinical Director for a National Institute of Mental Health funded consortium providing national consultation and training to a wide variety of community-based programs, and receiving several significant cross-cultural international awards to undertake research and scholarship in other countries (Fulbright Scholar in Brazil, World Rehabilitation Fund International Exchange of

Experts Research Fellow in India, Kellogg Foundation International Leadership and Development for 2½ years throughout Latin America and the Caribbean).

These experiences helped solidify a long term commitment for my life's social justice work. I have done consultation and training throughout the United States as well as worked in 34 countries focused on issues of social justice. My research and scholarship continues to focus on social justice and human rights related to youth and families at-risk and has been both throughout the U.S. and internationally. The key focus of my research has been an intersection in the areas of social justice and human rights, cross-cultural mental health, poverty, human trafficking, refugees, academic achievement and equity for all students, homelessness, separated and vulnerable children, immigrants, street children, and post-disaster mental health.

It remains somewhat unclear how this happens but at any given time in my career there are multiple activities on my plate, all related to my work which is rooted in social justice. Each of us must find our own style and pace, and I have always felt comfortable to have multiple activities going on at one time. I hope that it might be helpful for readers in crafting out their own social justice journeys and commitment, please allow me to describe what is going on for me currently in terms of my social justice work. I should also add, before sharing what I am doing at this moment that this is fairly standard for the pace I typically maintain as a professional, and that as a Full Professor who has been tenured for many years, I could easily choose not to do any of this work. It is also striking to me that I rarely seek out these activities any longer, but more often they come in the form of invitations or requests. I imagine that the bottom line is the passion and commitment to change and improving the human condition rather than any other extrinsic reward, which has been a fairly constant theme during my career, and in my opinion, has some relationship to the continued stream of invitations and opportunities. My firm conviction and belief is that this also relates to the work any of us do, that as we pursue social justice for the work itself, that opportunities expand and snowball so that we are able to contribute more and help with changes that are beneficial on multiple levels.

That being said, here is what is happening at the moment in my social justice work. As I write I am preparing for two invited and funded international projects and exploring a third international project. One is to Costa Rica to help set up a collaborative project to work on the prevention of child trafficking, since Costa Rica is a major international hub for child trafficking and commercial sex work, and to provide the first phase of a sequence of ongoing training sessions for mental health workers after the January earthquake. The second international trip is to do consultation work with a large international non-governmental organization based in Asia. I was invited lead a team to evaluate cross-border child trafficking programs in six Asian countries. In a few weeks I will be travelling to Thailand, China, and Cambodia, while the other evaluators will spend time in Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos. We will look at the success of the six nation cross-border programs, make recommendations for program improvement, and recommend national and international policy changes that may be helpful to develop more effective programming. Similar to other work I have done in the past and my roots with Upward Bound, I will spend time in meetings with high level government and agency officials as well as meeting with villagers and children in very remote villages (sometimes accessible only by motorcycle or boat) interviewing children and families. A third international social justice activity that is in the development stages is to provide psychosocial training and support for staff in Uganda working with child soldiers.

Along with these international activities, I have always maintained a balance with national projects, being committed to the helping in the U.S. as well. At the current time a colleague and I are in discussions with Washington D. C. Public Schools to develop a pilot project based on a group counseling model I co-developed to provide interventions with the 20% of students in the school system who are at the highest levels of failing. Simultaneously I was called by a major national educational association to be a speaker at their national conference about models and strategies for school counseling and academic success. The association and I are jointly surveying school counseling programs from across the country to determine what school counseling district-wide programs are doing and what needs to change, to try and determine next steps in promoting school counseling having a key role in academic achievement. To complement this work, along with a co-author, I am in the final stages of completing a book on Social Justice and in various stages of writing several articles about how to infuse social justice work in various aspects of mental health.

In summary, I truly enjoy my professional life. It is no longer work, but a melding of social justice work and life. Days unfold that provide an avenue for my commitment and passion to social justice and social change that will be a small part in trying to help and improve our world. I would like to leave readers with a small story that had significant impact on my social justice work that may have some relevance. It is a story that I often come back to when thinking about what we each can do and how each of us can contribute to social justice work. Earlier on in my career I was working in Nicaragua providing consultation to the Ministry of Health. This was after the civil war in Nicaragua and as always happens, there were many orphans as a result of the war. I was sitting with the national Minister of Health and Director of Mental Health and discussing staffing structures that would be most helpful in meeting the needs for the orphaned children. It was quite an experience feeling like I was having a national impact and helping to craft a national strategy. The very next day staff from the major mental health hospital wanted to take me out to a distant village to observe the success in aftercare program and to meet a former inpatient client. We drove to a remote area to meet the former client. Our drive took us on smaller and smaller roads until we finally stopped at the edge of a jungle. Leaving the car we began walking, through banana groves, through rice fields, past small shacks and over muddy rivers. As we walked I remember vividly thinking that I was truly in a remote corner of the world and surely near the "end of the earth". When we finally arrived at a small village I met a former client and his family. He had been given a scissors and comb, taught how to cut hair while in the mental health institution. Upon returning to his community he set up a small salon practice with the help of an old weather-beaten chair and broken mirror under an old tree that provided a little shade. As I spoke to him, his family, and the villagers who quickly gathered, the encounter quickly turned into a family therapy/community intervention session. As our time ended, the former client and his family expressed tremendous gratitude for our discussion and talked about how much better they felt after our meeting. It was at that moment that I had a profound realization – it truly did not matter if I was speaking with the Minister of Health to develop an entire national system, or helping one single person living in the jungle at the "end of the world." The experiences, the work, the emphasis on social justice were exactly the same – one person or an entire country. Whatever and wherever we have the capacity to help is exactly where we need to be. This lesson was a lesson well learned - at this point in my career it is fine if I am in a corner speaking with an individual in need of social justice support, help, and assistance, or working with a national government to recommend policy change about major global social justice issues. Social justice is social justice and each of us have a part to play. Peace be with you.

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