The Thick and the Thin: Beyond a Rosy-Colored Social Justice View of the World

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I want to dwell in beauty,
I want to dwell in quiet,
I want to dwell in goodness,
I just want to reside there—forever!

As I have written above, I yearn to reside in a space of “beauty, quiet, and goodness.” I recognize from my day-to-day trials and tribulations that it is not a state that is easy to attain. Around us on a local, national and international scale dwell stark inequities, terrible indignities and many hateful discourses, microaggressions, superior and inferior complexes and encounters due to our gender, sexual orientations, religion, race, class, culture, country of origin, languages spoken and unspoken, and abilities and disabilities. These experiences leave us all diminished and incomplete in realizing our potential as human beings on this planet. Such indignities are the ways of the world, our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of work, and even our places of worship (King, 2006; Tinker Sachs, Grant, & Wong, 2017). Nevertheless, while I continue my search for “dwelling in beauty, quiet and goodness,” I have been intrigued by the appearance of “social justice” in the research literature and in our everyday academic parlance (e.g. Brown, 2006; Harrison, 2015; Stinson & Wagner, 2010). I am intrigued because I cannot place its relatively “recent appearance” and “common usage” in academic professional organizations and spaces. What does this term social justice mean and where did it come from, “all of a sudden,” so explicitly, to my way of thinking?

Reisch, Ife, and Weil (2013) discuss in their chapter, “Social Justice, Human Rights, Values and Community Practice,” the historical evolution of the concepts of social justice along with human rights and the connections to values and community practice. Their purpose is to “decenter” Western perspectives and bring a more cultural, contextual, and historical
characteristic to the discussion. They state that “most of the contemporary literature, particularly in the United States assumes that the concepts are primarily modern and Western in origin” (p. 73). They go on to give us an overview of different societies’ representations of social justice which are

shaped by history, contexts, traditions, and institutions. Latin American narratives of justice for example, expressed vividly through poetry and the visual arts, synthesize indigenous myths and a hybrid form of Catholicism. In Africa, justice concepts are frequently depicted through songs and stories. Asian conceptions of social justice borrow heavily from Hindu, Buddhism and Confucian philosophy and are often presented through educational aphorisms. Western societies believe that social justice ideas are most clearly reflected in policy priorities. (p. 74)

The authors also help us appreciate different orientations to social justice (collectivist versus individualistic, cultural and universal characteristics) as they strive to develop a social justice-oriented practice for “today’s multicultural world” (p. 75). In doing so, they show connections to universal human rights as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights after WWII. However, they trace the origins of social justice back to the world’s major religions. Reisch, Ife, and Weil (2013) note that “Despite their differences, common themes of nearly all religions include the centrality of righteousness or fairness, mutuality, the importance of adherence to laws or customs and loyalty to the community” (p. 76, their italics).

Reisch, Ife, and Weil (2013) embolden me to speak my truth: I am a Christian and Catholic, and my commitment to a socially just world is rooted in my faith. While concepts of social justice can be attributed to the world’s major religions, this is generally unacknowledged in the literature by scholars who seem mostly afraid to explain the sources of their commitment
to social justice. This stance is mostly true for much of what we write in academic papers and reports. Many of us adopt a sanitized “objectivity” that denies our humanity, where we come from, and what we are about, with no or limited explanation for why we talk, write, teach, and research the way we do. We void out the sources of our truths and tell a story of research that is devoid of feelings and passions.

In preparing this editorial, based on my own limited understanding of social justice from an acknowledged biased Judeo-Christian perspective steeped in me from my K-12 Catholic school upbringing, I asked colleagues from different faith traditions to explain their understanding of social justice. They have permitted me to include their words in this editorial. I am grateful for their contributions.

- **Joseph Feinberg, Associate Professor of Social Studies, Georgia State University:**

  As a Jew, I was taught at a relatively young age about *tzedakah*, which typically means charitable giving. In Jewish biblical text, *tzedakah* is frequently coupled with justice, but *tzedakah* is not something you do to feel good as a Jew. It is a *mitzvot* or commandment. Thus, *tzedakah* and social justice for many Jews, including myself, carries a deep spiritual meaning that connects us as human beings and inspires us to make the world a more just and caring place. The article linked below also reflects many of my beliefs about social justice and Judaism:


- **Dr. Gholncesar Muhammad, Assistant Professor of Language and Literacy, Georgia State University**

  My *social justice and intellectual journey started with Islam*. Through my Islamic studies and practices, we are commanded to read, write, think and build a better humanity for all. This speaks to the concept of *Iqra*, which means to read
and interrogate this world (including our own beliefs). This is what we are supposed to do as Muslims and this grounds my thinking and my literacy practices. It serves as a foundation for social justice and education. In my faith community of Islam, social justice is defined as “wanting for yourself what you want for others.” Perhaps the others are those in society who have been historically and systematically marginalized. If we think of the most marginalized, oppressed or struggling person in a school, university or society—the ways in which we support, attend to, and love that person, should be how we are to be defined, measured, and spoken about. Islam teaches us to be in a constant state of resisting oppression, racism, sexism, and other prejudices—to respond to oppression. In Islam, there is a hadith (tradition) of how we are to be socially just and respond to wrongdoing. The hadith says that if we see injustice, to first respond by our hand or our actions. If we are unable to respond this way, we should respond with our tongue (through words or writings). If we are unable to do either, we are to feel it is wrong within our hearts. I find in my own quest for social justice, I am working within these three approaches. If we do none of these things, if we are so passive and unresponsive, we are not going to improve humanity.

- Dr. Iman Chahine, Associate Professor of Mathematics Education, Georgia State University

As a devout Muslim, I believe that the mission of all Prophets was to elevate human existence and establish unparalleled just societies through submission to the Creator. Justice is a condition for inner peace, to be at peace with ourselves,
and to be just in society to get social peace. There is no social peace without social justice.

My colleagues’ statements “speak” their kinship to their spiritual sources of social justice, a mostly unacknowledged endeavor in academic spaces. I argue that we should not have to hide our sources of social justice and that “justice” is not a recent construct but a very old one yet it is written about as if it were something new due to the heavy emphasis in virtually every sphere on “social justice.” However, just because I am talking about “unacknowledged” sources of social justice in the academy and in academic papers does not mean that everyone’s source of justice needs to be based on theology or spiritual beliefs. Some would claim that their understanding of social justice has nothing to do with organized religion or a spiritual being. What I am saying in this editorial is that the source of my social justice as well as that of many others, more often than not, is kept secret. I wish to change that.

So, for myself, I draw on the words of noted Catholic theologian Richard Rohr. He states:

Jesus instructs us to be passionate for social, economic, and racial justice. That’s the real meaning of the Hebrew word for justice and the Jewish insistence on it. Resist systemic, structured, institutionalized injustice with every bone in your body, with all your might, with your very soul, he teaches. Seek justice as if it were your food and drink, your bread and water, as if it were a matter of life and death, which it is. . .Within our relationship to the God of justice and peace, those who give their lives to that struggle, Jesus promises, will be satisfied. (Rohr, 2018)

I hope my life as an international, intercultural critical teacher educator professor of ESOL, Language and Literacy lives the words of Jesus Christ (see Tinker Sachs, 2013). I hope I have
not hidden from my source in the work I do, but represent my truth boldly. I still have a lot to learn and a lot more to do in order to take up fully the stance of social justice explicitly in my academic work and so I come out in this editorial. I encourage you, dear reader, to do the same, regardless of your source. The world is both beautiful and ugly, but we must see beyond the rosy colored social justice view of the world to know the “thick” of the term, not the thin superficial use of the concept. Leadership through action is the ultimate requirement. Naming who we are, stating what we do and saying why, are aspects of “coming out.” This is the thick of it and it does take some courage.

In talking about social justice leadership, Marshall and Oliva (2009) ask us to “reconnect with emotional and idealistic stances” (p. 10). They believe that social justice leadership “supports leaders’ impulses to transgress, to throw aside the traditional bureaucratic rationality and the limiting conceptualization of leadership” (p. 10). I do agree. They go on to say that social justice:

- supports their efforts to conceptualize and articulate models of leadership that incorporate democratic community engagement, spirituality and emotion, and caring and connection. In this way, social justice leaders build their capacities to walk the talk in order to move beyond that which is just philosophical, just rhetoric, and just short-sighted, quick-fix policy (p. 10).

Another important criterion for social justice leaders is to develop collaborators and allies who work to decentralize and distribute dominant identities. Whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy need to be challenged and along with heterosexuality, decentered so that the values of all groups are respected, affirmed, and acknowledged (Teaching Tolerance, 2018). I believe too, that we need to acknowledge and decenter Christianity as
the “privileged” religion in the Western world along with whiteness and heterosexuality.

My colleagues from different spiritual traditions and those who do not subscribe to one will help to strengthen my knowledge and insight in this regard.

In very recent times, 2004, given the deep history of social justice, the largest educational research association in the world, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) adopted and later affirmed in 2006 a “Social Justice Mission Statement” as an indication of its commitment to social justice and “as an elaboration of its general research mission.” The commitment is stated as follows:

- to promote diversity and inclusiveness in AERA; that is, that all AERA members and participants in its activities have open access and opportunity (e.g., as officers or other leadership roles in SIGs, Divisions, or AERA-wide; in publishing, in Annual Meeting participation, or in AERA-sponsored activity);
- to promote social justice principles and policies in the conduct of education research; that is, in funding of research and training;
- to promote activities (e.g., through the work of the Organization of Institutional Affiliates, in AERA’s education and training programs) that foster a diverse community of education researchers; and
- to disseminate and promote the use of research knowledge and stimulate interest in research on social justice issues related to education. (http://www.aera.net/About-AERA/Key-Programs/Social-Justice/Social-Justice-Mission-Statement)

In addition to articulating a commitment to social justice, AERA has a social justice program, which “develops and supports programmatic efforts which examines issues in education research that promote diversity and equity.” There is also an award for social justice which began in 2004,
and a social justice Special Interest Group which has awards for outstanding social justice dissertation and teaching. The first recipient of the social justice award was multicultural educator James A. Banks. At the time of his acceptance of the award at the annual general meeting April 12-16, 2004 (San Diego, California), he said that:

We must nurture, support and affirm the identities of students from marginalized cultural, ethnic, and language groups if we expect them to endorse national values, become cosmopolitans, and work to make their local communities, the nation, and the world more just and humane (Banks, 2004, p. 297).

Just as the definitions and practices of social justice are historical, contextual, multiple, and varied, so are our four papers for this edition as they capture some of the ways social justice can be enacted in our classrooms.

Christine E. Sleeter, the 2009 recipient of AERA’s Social Justice Award, describes a turn in her career as a social justice teacher education professor. Sleeter is now writing historical fiction as a platform to enact social justice in the teacher educator classroom. Using her own German ancestry as a backdrop, Sleeter’s *Writing Fiction for Social Transformation*, uses excerpts from her novel, *White Bread*, to demonstrate how critical family history can be used to promote social justice praxis in teacher education.

Social studies teacher Matt Dingler takes his secondary students on a walk in critical pedagogy through artistic remixing activities and critical discussions. His students get to remix iconic historical pictures of the past to recreate the future. In *Envisioning our Brightest Social Future: The Remixed Gallery of American History*, Dingler reflexively details his procedures for remixing in a social studies classroom and demonstrates to us the transformative power of teaching with a social justice oriented lens.
Magdalena Vergara and Alexis Birner challenge the “single story” dominant way of seeing in an elementary classroom. In *Whose Nation Are We Presenting? Deconstructing Canada with Third-Grade Students*, Vergara and Birner use postcolonial literature and the wisdom and experiences of community members who served as living libraries, to detail how they worked collaboratively to dismantle the traditional school texts’ endorsement of Canada as a nation with a single story. Their intentionality in seeking to disrupt the norm is steeped in *living* social justice.

Charity Gordon demonstrates the power of critical praxis in working with historically marginalized diverse high school students in an English classroom. Gordon’s *Critical Literacy and the Arts: Using One-Act Plays to Promote Social Justice* details how she and a classroom teacher developed and enacted critical praxis. Building on and extending students’ lived experiences through reading and discussing critical texts, Gordon and the classroom teacher laid fertile ground for students’ voices to be heard through the creation of their one-act plays. Social justice exemplified through critical pedagogy in action.

Collectively, these papers are bright rays of sunlight and hopefulness as we all search for meaning in our lives as educators. I thank all our contributors and reviewers for working to open spaces for constructive dialogue about how all of us can be better people on the face of this earth. I do want to *dwell in beauty, in quiet, in goodness*, but this state cannot be attained by wishing it or merely thinking about it or just saying it. We need to actively and intentionally work for it! This is the thick and the thin of it. We cannot live with a rosy colored view of social justice. Social justice enactment requires us to live it, breathe it and be compelled to act by it as these papers encourage us to do. I thank you all for being part of this wonderful endeavor. Happy and Provocative Reading!
Gertrude Tinker Sachs

Editor

Praxis

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