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What is Social Justice?: A Personal Manifesto

Jaime D. Bunting

Ouachita Baptist University, bun62907@obu.edu

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Jaime Bunting

Social Justice MWF 1-1:50pm

Myra Houser

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Personal Manifesto

When I told people that I was taking a social justice class, I received a various range of reactions. Some people seemed supportive and excited about the idea. Others seemed wary of it, obviously holding back their opinions. Some even apologized saying, “that just sounds hard.” Most commonly, though, I received the question, “what exactly is social justice?”. This was the dreaded question to which I did not know the answer myself. All I knew was that I wanted to help people, plain and simple. As it turns out, social justice is much more complex than that. Today’s world is very diverse and noisy, with many opinions and arguments coming from every direction. After delving into the course, I soon came to realize that social justice looks different for every person. There is so much brokenness and misunderstanding in the world and every person has an opinion on how to fix it. Looking back though, it really is about “helping” people (whatever this help may mean to you). In order to help someone for the better, though, you must first understand their problem. Social Justice is the process of building awareness and empathy with the goal of bringing about how things should be, and showing love to others by fighting for the greater good. I will explain how this definition came to be with personal experience and with knowledge gained in class through literature and discussion.

Awareness, Empathy & the Greater Good:

First, let's explore the first part of the definition, *building awareness and empathy*. One hears the term awareness in today's society a lot. It is thrown around, whether it be by advocacy groups or non-profits wishing to communicate their causes or groups of people speaking to those who are unaware of issues that they as a group deal with. A national example would be the Black Lives Matter movement, which brings awareness to unequal treatment of black lives in society compared to others. A local example would be the Child Safety Center hosting a 5-K that enlightens the community on why they exist and also raises money for their cause. Raising awareness is a good and necessary step because it is the first step in the social justice process, due to the fact that if someone is not aware that a problem even exists, then they simply will not be able to fix it. This being said, awareness in itself is not justice, it is only a step forward towards achieving justice. Groups can often get stuck in the cause of awareness and forget about taking action. Just because someone knows of problem does not mean that they will care enough about it to respond, nor do they know how to go about responding. This is where empathy comes in. Empathy is envisioning yourself in someone else's place in attempt to understand their situation and how they are feeling. It turns an impersonal situation personal, gets to the heart of the issue, guides in the best way possible to address the issue and finds a way to move forward from it. This is a crucial part in social justice. It is how we can learn be responsive to people's needs in the appropriate manner and help other people how they want to be helped. When awareness and empathy come together, the act of justice can occur.

Awareness and empathy were the main focus of social justice class. We read a wide array of literature from authors of various backgrounds. This sparked discussion that led to the sharing of opinions and thoughts on the issues. Also, through reading the stories authors told and their thoughts on issues that exist in the world, I developed awareness and knowledge of the issues myself. By doing all of this, we learn to empathize with others and become more open to what they have to say. The books read also did not focus one specific issue, rather each book took a different approach to justice and showed how it looks different depending on a specific circumstance.

The first example of this is the book *Far from the Tree*. The author, Andrew Solomon, writes about what he calls horizontal Identities. Horizontal identities are things that set you apart from other members in your family. Solomon writes from a unique perspective because he himself is gay and has faced strife within his own family because of this identity. The whole premise of his book is to learn about families who also deal with horizontal identities in order to deepen his understanding of them and of his own. He does so through qualitative research, in which he interviews countless families and records their stories. The identities he addresses are Dwarfism, Down Syndrome, Autism, Schizophrenia, Disability, Prodigies, Rape, Crime and Transgenderism. These identities are commonly associated with social justice because individuals and groups of people who deal with them are often mistreated and misunderstood.

One chapter I read in depth from the book is *Autism*. I personally had not thought of this as a social justice issue until further reading about it. Autism is a syndrome that by definition impedes a person's ability to communicate. Autism exists on a scale, however, which means the degree to which autism affects communication and behaviors varies for every autistic

person. The significance of this is that some autistic people have the ability to voice their needs and wants to society, while others depend on caretakers to do this for them. This means that caretakers, who are not autistic themselves, base their cases off of assumption. The problem with this is that these cases sometimes conflict with those of autistic people who have the ability to speak for themselves (Such as the case of caretakers wanting to eradicate Autism, while some autistic people see this as eradicating their identity). This issue indicates one of the questions that make justice so complex: how can you truly fight for justice when the intended outcome of justice may look different for every person?

Solomon reaches his goal in *Far from the Tree* because he brings awareness to identities that often make people feel marginalized. He also speaks encouragement into their lives by showing the beauty that can come from difficult situations. He depicts this through real and emotion-filled stories that expand the reader's empathy.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* is another example of a book that has the goal of building awareness and empathy. Coates writes the book as a letter to his son. He wishes to use his life experiences to explain to his son the hardship of being an African American in America. Referring to the Gettysburg Address given by President Abraham Lincoln, Coates writes,

"The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant "government of the people" but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term "people" to truly mean. In 1836 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me. Thus America's problem is not its betrayal of "government of the people," but the means by which "the people" acquired their names (Coates 6)."

Here Coates briefly alludes to American history and how it was founded on the notion that African Americans did not count as full people. A common question of today is, “why does this matter if it was part of history and is in the past?” Coates uses the rest of his book to explain the relevance of the matter. He describes the residual effects of this foundational racism and calls out the racism that still exists today. Coates recalls the constant fear he lived in growing up from simply just walking home from school or going to the grocery store, the lessened opportunities that were presented to him compared to others, and the corrupt police officers in the county he grew up in. All of these were because of how others reacted by seeing the color of his skin. Although Coates does not mention it, gentrification is another example of racial inequality that exists in the world. The issue of racism is one that is very present in today’s news and media. Because of this, it is important to read books like *Between the World and Me* that contain a perspective you may have never been introduced to before that will help you better understand the issue.

Assassination of a Saint, by Matt Eisenbrandt, brings awareness to the many injustices that plagued the El Salvadorian society and tells the story of how they were combated. Eisenbrandt writes about Oscar Romero, a former Archbishop of El Salvador who was murdered. A corrupt government financed by the rich of the country formed “death squads” to invoke terror upon citizens for speaking out against the government. After becoming archbishop, Romero used his platform to speak out against the wrongdoings of the government to help free the oppressed. Romero was soon assassinated because of this and Eisenbrandt’s book details how the U.S. civil lawsuit came about against a conspirer in the murder. Towards the end of the book Eisenbrandt speaks of a painting in a coffee shop where he did most of his writing...

“I have often thought of that painting as I write about Óscar Romero and the men who killed him. The *campesino* in the painting represents the people Romero gave his life defending, the voiceless to whom Romero gave a voice. More than anything else, the coffee beans picked by exploited and impoverished Salvadoran workers generated the massive inequalities and repression that Romero confronted. Those *campesinos*, Romero often said, were his flock and he was their Shepard (Eisenbrandt 167).”

This story is a tragic, yet beautiful example of someone who sacrificed their life to fight for what they believed was right. The author, Eisenbrandt, is also an example of someone who fights for the pursuit of justice. Eisenbrandt himself is one of the human rights attorneys who worked tirelessly to find evidence and build a case against Romero’s murderers.

As shown above, *Far from the Tree*, *Between the World and Me* and *Assassination of a Saint* all confront different issues. These issues, though different, all fall under the broad category of social justice. They are all united in the fact they are real-life concerns that humans either deal with themselves or encounter as part of living in a diverse society. The true narratives that the authors portray all fight for one goal: to promote fairness and equality regardless of one’s horizontal identity, race, or social ranking, which in their case is fighting for the *greater good*.

Redemption and Love:

Redemption, to me, is restoring things to how they were meant to be, which is the main purpose of justice. The reason justice even exists is because of the fallen world in which we live, due to the sin of humankind. God wants to restore the earth to the perfect state he created it to be. All of scripture speaks to God’s characters and shows that he achieves justice through love and grace. In Psalms it says,

“He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them- he remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, and Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, and he frustrates the ways of the wicked (Psalm 146).”

This psalm describes who God is and what he does to *bring about how things should be*. The ultimate example of how God showed grace and love is by sending his son, Jesus. Not only did Jesus fulfil the greatest act of love by giving his life for all, but he also lived a life dedicated to justice. Greg Foster explains this well in his article titled, “How Should We Talk About Justice and the Gospel”. Foster writes,

“Jesus’ example of showing love to other people. “The gospel isn’t only a message of forgiveness but also of restoration to righteousness. God forgives our injustice in order to restore us to justice. He saves us not only because he loves us, but also because he hates sin and will not allow his beautiful world to forever remain under the influence of evil (Forster).”

In his short lifetime, Jesus performed miracles that healed and fed thousands of people. He broke social norms by eating and socializing with societal outcasts. He defied religious law by preaching on the Sabbath. He called out the Sadducees for being judgmental and faithless...and on and on the list could go. Jesus lived the perfect life of what it looks like to *love others*.

Social Justice in My Own Life:

After considering these things, the question arises, how can I personally act out social justice? What is a concrete avenue to take? Solomon used the power of communication and writing to convey the stories of families and horizontal identities. Coates used his own story to

illuminate the presence of racism in America. Óscar Romero used his platform of Archbishop to speak out against the injustice in El Salvador. Eseinbrandt and other attorneys used their degrees to build a case against Romero's murderers. Jesus, the greatest example of justice, healed the sick, befriended the lonely and gave help to the needy.

One of my friends from my home church said something this past summer that has stuck with me ever since. My pastor had been preaching on finding justice for the poor and asked my friend if she would speak in front of the church on how that has applied to her life. She spoke about how she sees great needs in the world, especially of people in developing countries who do not have access to the same necessities and comforts as those in richer countries. She knew she wished to help them, but also knew that just wanting to help was not enough. She yearned for something tangible. Then came the time for her to go to college and choose her major. She decided to study both engineering and international relations. Engineering is something she enjoys and is skilled at, while international relations will help her learn more about the world. With engineering, she will have a concrete way to help people: by building needed infrastructure for things like schools and water systems. Upon hearing her speak, I evaluated my own interests and skills. I too want to use those skills to tangibly help others. I continued to look for answers on how to best use my skills and found more insight while taking social justice class. I realized that I have a passion for wanting to help children with difficult situations. I also have a love for music and art. I had an epiphany one day as to how to reconcile these two areas of interest. In the future I would like to establish and after school center where children can have a safe space where they can express themselves through the

arts. I realize there are many pathways I can take to achieve this goal, but I am now one step closer in figuring out how to make these plans a reality and act out justice in my own life.

Tying it all Together:

Social justice can be a long and complicated process. With all of the pain that exists within the world, trying to figure out how to best act out justice can be overwhelming and difficult. To simplify it: first you must become aware of something, then empathize with it, then use what you are best at to fight for what you believe is right. This can be seen in how social justice is playing out in my own life and how it has played out in the lives of Solomon, Coates, Romero and Eisenbrandt.

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