

12-2016

A Personal Manifesto: What is Justice?

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Recommended Citation

Spears, Kacy Earnest, "A Personal Manifesto: What is Justice?" (2016). *Social Justice Class Papers*. 11.
<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/sjus/11>

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Intro to Social Justice
Dr. Houser
15 December 2016

Personal Manifesto- "What is Justice?"

To me, social justice is a complex definition with several clauses. The most concise definition to me would be: a discipline and practice that strives toward social equality for all using grace, acceptance, and protecting everyone's individual rights. That's not even a complete definition. There are so many clauses to social justice, such as: knowing the difference between palliative and long term care, knowing which is best for the situation, comparing the possible outcomes of your work and choosing the option that best suits the needs of the people you're serving, knowing the culture, etc. All this to say that I probably can't define justice in these eight pages, but I'm a white person, so of course I'm going to do it anyway. Let's go with the aforementioned "discipline and practice" definition and break that down some.

Discipline/Education

Anything more complex than daily functions requires study and analysis. Social justice and justice workers, in the sense of those that study justice (lawyers, judges, etc.), all must study their subject before practicing. Social justice requires an intimate study with cultures, methods of disaster relief and response, philosophy, social theorists, and history. Ouachita was right in making the major a compilation of various fields.

For those going into law and the judicial system, their studies include history, law past and present, ethics, philosophy, culture and how that affects their client and themselves, and the list goes on. Justice, this state of equality, cannot be attained without educated individuals. For example, for the Ebola 100 project, I transcribed an interview with an anthropologist that travelled overseas to help with relief efforts. She discussed her degrees and how she used what she learned in college to help with the Ebola response. She knew the process, knew she had to study the culture, and knew how to use her skills to benefit the effort. To be an advocate for justice/justice worker, you must know the issue, know how to respond, and estimate the outcome.

Paul Kalanithi, author of *When Breath Becomes Air*, chose his vocation and discipline through a series of questioning himself and what he loves. After that, he went through almost a dozen years of tedious schooling to do his justice work as a neurosurgeon. Kalanithi says “this is how 99 percent of people select their jobs: pay, work environment, hours. But that’s the point. Putting lifestyle first is how you find a job—not a calling.”¹ He tells the story of how he became enlightened to this career path—Kalanithi was in the hospital working, and he overheard a conversation about a child that had brain cancer, and the doctor was warning the parents that removal of the tumor could lead to personality differences. Kalanithi then realized that the brain, the hub of all information in our bodies, housed our personality, the exact thing that makes us one hundred

¹ Kalanithi, Paul, and A. Verghese. *When Breath Becomes Air*. New York: Random House, 2016. Print.

percent us. His mission then became to protect that, like a Superman of brain surgery, protecting his Metropolis of individuality.

It should be apparent by now that you don't have to have a degree in justice work to be an advocate for social justice and positive change. Language and communications degrees are needed in justice work as well. Take for example, the article on Marshallese women we read in class. Marshallese women in Arkansas were tricked into believing that if they get pregnant, they can have their child live with someone else for eighteen years, then the child will return to their mother. The lie was told to these women by adoption agencies, trying to make a quick couple thousand dollars. It was ideal to the Marshallese women to have their child raised by a different couple to give that child a better life, but they had no idea that they were giving their child up forever. These women did not speak English and didn't understand the terms of the adoption. Referring back to my definition of social justice, is this just? No, because the Marshallese women were not treated equally to others in the community, rather they were exploited. If there were someone in the area that spoke both languages and volunteered to translate clearly the terms of agreement, justice could be done, and the mothers would have the choice of then making an educated decision, an option that didn't have before.

Practice

These aforementioned educated individuals will need to apply that knowledge to do justice work. I mean, you can sit in a classroom all day, but if

you don't apply that knowledge, what's the point? Just like that anthropologist, you have to go out and use your education. And this is where I get hung up a bit, because defining justice can be so fuzzy, how do people know that they are doing justice work? I've decided the answer to this question is that they get a warm fuzzy feeling in their stomachs and those that were helped are in a better state than before, like Kalanithi felt when he performed successful surgeries with precision and grace.

Social Equality for All

In one of the first days of class, we discussed layers of privilege and the white savior complex. To me, removing privilege as a whole would be a gigantic push for social justice and equality. Now, what defines equality? Aye, there's the rub. There are different kinds of justice used to hypothetically reach equality.

There's distributive justice, which is defined as the "just distribution of goods to all."² This seems to be everyone's go-to mental picture when they hear the words "social justice." When I think of distributive justice, I think of malaria rescue efforts. Doctors and volunteers travel overseas, meet with malaria patients, hand them all malaria nets and go home...but not all of the people in that area had malaria, and some could be on their deathbed. It's ultimately not a great idea because everyone has different needs, and distributive justice won't meet everyone's unique needs. So, it's equal distribution, but the effects are not

² "Distributive Justice." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/dist-jus/>>.

that everyone is considered equal. To me, this is the type of justice that best reflects the white savior complex. It feels like people are going overseas to third world countries to pass out supplied and palliative care to take a selfie with them and then leave. Sure, it can help some, and they need those malaria nets, but why not help the country produce educated doctors that could prevent malaria there?

Another type of justice is procedural justice, which is the “fair application of rules and processes so that all who are subject to rules get an impartial outcome.”³ So, procedural justice is basically fair treatment justice. This is what lawyers practice to ensure that justice remains blind and equal.

A form of justice that we discussed frequently in class was the utilitarian take on justice. Jeremy Bentham is accredited with the founding of utilitarianism. Bentham believes that “the highest principle of morality is to maximize happiness, the overall balance of pleasure over pain.”⁴ The core of utilitarian values is maximizing good for the maximum amount of people. Dr. Wight had us ponder the trolley situation several times this semester to weed out the utilitarian bunch.

Suppose you are the driver of a trolley car hurtling down the track at sixty miles an hour. Up ahead you see five workers standing on the track, tools

³ "What Are the Different Types of Justice?" *Reference*. Web. 14 Dec. 2016. <<https://www.reference.com/government-politics/different-types-justice-5477c48b2f0f736d#>>.

⁴ Sandel, Michael J. *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. Print.

in hand. You try to stop, but you can't. The brakes don't work. You feel desperate, because you know that if you crash into these five workers, they will all die... Suddenly, you notice a side track, off to the right. There is a worker on that track, too, but only one. You realize that you can turn the trolley car onto the side track, killing the one worker, but sparing the five.

What should you do (Sandel)?

Most of us have strong morals and negative feelings toward utilitarianism, so we all stated that neither option was moral because we'd be taking innocent lives either way. Refer back to my definition of social justice. Is this just? No, because the justice worker (in this case, the train operator) isn't working with grace or striving to protect individual rights. And while the option of killing the one person is more appealing, it then creates a moral mindset that killing less is fine so long as you're protecting more, and that's not the case. It's one of those theories that look good on paper, but in practice, will probably fall through.

Another aspect of social equality for all that we've discussed in class is understanding and respecting individual's horizontal identities. Vertical identities are the traits that children share with their parents. Horizontal identities are when "someone has an inherent or acquired trait that is foreign to his or her parents, and must therefore acquire identity from a peer group."⁵ Vertical identities also need to be protected, but less are scrutinized. For example, if your biological parents are Caucasian, then you are also Caucasian, and your race isn't

⁵ Solomon, Andrew. *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity*. New York: Scribner, 2012. Print.

scrutinized in the United States. However, if you are African American, Latino, Chinese, Japanese, Native American, or literally anything except Caucasian, your vertical identity puts you at a disadvantage.

Horizontal identities are more personal and unique to individuals. Sexuality, disability, certain actions and abilities, etc. are all horizontal identities. In the part of the world that we live in currently, these are more scrutinized than vertical identities. Recently, I was eating lunch with a group of friends that I rarely spoke with, and they started this horrid string of jokes about how they identify themselves. "I identify as a giant purple elephant, so I can use whichever bathroom I like." "I identify as not a college student." And that's not just. Those that don't identify as a binary gender should have the basic human right to walk in the cafeteria without overhearing a conversation that damages their perception of themselves. It's dehumanizing and unnecessary to judge those with a horizontal identity beyond your understanding.

Grace, Acceptance, and Striving

As a Christian working toward being in the justice field, these three concepts are key. I mean grace in both definitions- elegance as well as God's favor. Justice work is gritty at times, and it may be challenging to stay elegant and execute tasks beautifully, and we all need God's favor as a reminder of why we do the work we do. God's grace has allowed us the opportunities presented before us as justice students to make this world, His creation, slightly more livable.

As a justice worker, you need acceptance. Not everything is going to happen rhythmically and automatically, and we will fail, probably frequently.

Application- How to Be Batman

So, how does one apply these concepts of justice in reality? By being Batman. Batman gained an education in culture and justice not by sitting in a classroom but by going out and learning about the world around him. From there, he applied that knowledge to Gotham and began fighting crime.

Now, that's not to say that we should all fight crime, but we should strive to be vigilantes of justice and question the systems that surround us. How do we do this? Again, education, education, practice, then application. I'm striving to be like Batman, so I've created a list of all the injustices I can think of, and for some of them, there are solutions offered.

- Financial Injustice- Poverty is cyclical and at times, a vertical identity. So, to escape this pattern, someone that finds themselves in poverty can ask for resources. There are several non-profits popping up that prepare individuals that need assistance for job interviews by giving them a work outfit free of charge, offering classes in resume building and career development. Now, that won't solve all the problems, but it's a start.
- Racial Injustice- Don't be a racist. Don't raise racist children. Boom. Problem solved.
- Gender Injustice- If someone is the subject of gender injustice, there are systems in place to report those instances of injustice. If it continues, raise

hell. I'm serious. Raising awareness of the issue is one of the best ways to solve a problem.

- Religious Injustice- Don't make disrespectful comments toward a religion. Understand that others believe in different ideologies, and understand that it is not your place on this small planet to determine what is appropriate for everyone.

There are hundreds more injustices in this world, and we can work to fix them.

So long as we go about the matter with education, practice, grace, and acceptance.