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### What is Social Justice to Me?

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Michal Felan

Myra Houser

Intro to Social Justice

13 December 2019

### What is Social Justice to Me?

What is social justice? Okay, wow what a loaded question. I think that social justice can be a little different for everyone. It all depends on how you were raised and the people you are surrounded with. We as humans get a lot of our ideas from others, and we then form our own ideas based off those ideas. Social justice has many different meanings for me alone, much less the entire world. I think that there is an endless number of definitions. It is hard to know where to begin. I believe that social justice includes a wide variety of different topics such as racism, sexism, ableism, homelessness, poverty and a plethora of other topics that I will be discussing in this paper. My view of social justice is always changing. I am always learning about new topics that I had previously been ignorant about before. I am constantly looking at social justice accounts on social media, watching the news, and talking to people to learn more about what I can do to learn more about certain things and what I can do to help. Right now, I am also keeping up with the presidential candidates currently running for president. This way, I can elect someone who reflects my views and are able to make the changes I think need to be made. Social justice is a great way to learn and grow as a person. Social justice is an opportunity for us to leave the earth a better place than when you enter it.

When I look up the definition of social justice, The first thing that opens on the internet says “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society.

While I do think that this is a good definition, I feel that it does not fully encapsulate what this term means. There are so many issues that need to be represented in this term and I think that it is nearly impossible to put everything in one sentence or one simple definition. Sometimes, I feel that social justice is more of a feeling or a mind set. It is a set of beliefs that one has and it differs from person to person. I am going to explain what it means to me and how it has changed throughout my life.

For most of my life, I lived in a small town that is predominantly white and Christian. That was what I grew up with. A lot of my views reflected that. It is not something that I am proud of but it is the truth. When I was going into ninth grade, I moved to Little Rock Central High School. LRCH is a predominantly black and minority Christian school. It was quite a difference from my school in Benton. I came in contact with so many different types of people. Every type of person was represented at Central High School. It was quite a culture shock. As time went on, I learned more about the many different people present at my school. The views I previously had began to change. This school has become a huge part of who I am today; it shaped a lot of my views and passions and I am very grateful. Without moving to Central, I have no idea who or where I would be. Before I went to Central, I never really cared about politics or social justice. After moving there, I met a lot of people who cared very much about those topics. I began to pay more attention to the people around me and their struggles. I realized that I could be a part of the change. I could use my gifts and my privilege to help others. After that realization I joined my school "Students for Justice" club and became what is commonly known as a "social justice warrior", which often has a negative connotation to it, but I am proud to be considered a social justice warrior. I began going to marches and organizing protests at my

school. I protested in favor of DACA and I helped plan my school's national gun violence walkout that took place after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, as well as many other things. I would now say that my political views and what I stand for are a main part of who I am.

Even since coming to college, my view on social justice has changed. When I thought of social justice, I thought of sexism, racism, ableism, as well as other things. However, I did not think of homelessness and poverty. When we read *Evicted*, my eyes were opened to a whole new field of social justice that I had not previously thought of. It was interesting to hear my peers' views on this topic because some of them grew up with homelessness and poverty around them. I had the privilege of never having to worry about either homelessness or poverty. I was ignorant to the issue. Now that I had to read about it in a couple of books such as *Evicted*, I have once again changed how I view social justice to include that. Matthew Desmond, the author of *Evicted*, said, "it is hard to argue that housing is not a fundamental human need. Decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country. The reason is simple: without stable shelter, everything else falls apart". *Evicted* was one of my favorite books that we read this semester. I learned so much from the character's stories and it affected me in a big way. It was a book that kept me up thinking at night. The topic of poverty and homelessness was the topic that I knew the least about. I never had to deal with it and nobody close to me dealt with it either. Desmond was able to make me feel like I personally knew each of the characters and they were someone that I cared about. I have been told that one of my gifts is empathy and because I feel so much through empathy, this book was rather hard for me to read. I began to think about if that had been me or someone I knew. As I read the book, I thought

about how there was no good way for the people in the book to get out of their situation. As talked about in class, it is kind of a snowball effect. Once you are homeless, it is so so hard to get out. It is a topic that isn't talked about nearly enough. There is also no clear answer as to what to do for this issue. People need to be more educated on this topic before we as a people can come up with a clear answer. Desmond states that "If poverty persists in America, it is not for lack of resources."

I have always thought that the death penalty was not right. In some cases, I believe that it is not deserved, and in others I believed that death would be too easy. Now, I understand that might seem a little harsh and morbid, but it is what I used to believe. *Just Mercy*, written by Bryan Stevenson, changed my view on the death penalty. For people like serial killers and school shooters, I believe that they should be sentenced for life and have to live the rest of their natural life in prison. After reading *Just Mercy*, I was shocked about how many people are actually sentenced to death and what constitutes the death penalty. Reading that book opened my eyes to other issues with the death penalty that I hadn't previously thought about. In *Just Mercy*, the death penalty was used in a racist manner; I never thought about how that could happen. There was overwhelming evidence and proof that the main character, Walter, did not commit the crime he was accused of. However, he was still sentenced to death. We need more people like Stevenson dedicated to helping people like Walter. I had never done much research into the death penalty because, like poverty and homelessness, I was never really surrounded by it. I had never heard of someone being wrongly accused of something and as a result, getting the death penalty. Stevenson says "The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned." We need to show mercy to

people. Along those lines, Steveson says “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.” These people are more than the mistakes that they have made. They are also more than what people see them as. As Christians and social justice seekers, we should be keen to show people mercy, but the death penalty does not reflect that.

There were some things that were already a part of my definition of social justice that I learned more about. Homophobia and transphobia have always been an obvious issue to me. However, when I read Andrew Solomon’s *Far From the Tree*, I learned more about transgender people than I had previously known. I thought that this was an issue that I was quite educated on, however, while reading, I was proven wrong. I didn’t know much about the cost and the difficulty of transitioning. This is an issue that needs to be talked about more. Transitioning is not covered by insurance so it is completely out of pocket, making it very expensive. A lot of people who transition end up staying with the body parts they have. We need to make it more accessible for people to have the body that they want. I have always been passionate about this topic, but now that I know more about what the issues are, I know how to effectively fight for it.

Now that I have discussed what social justice means to me and how it has changed over the years, I will talk about the people that might disagree with me. There are many different views on the many topics that fall under social justice for me. One of the biggest passions of mine is womens’ rights. As a woman this one is probably the most applicable to me. There are many different aspects of womens’ rights and I have an opinion on pretty much all of them. I love marching in womens’ marches and fighting for basic human rights for women. The fact that we still have a wage gap in 2019, almost 2020 is unfathomable. There are people in this world that think that men and women deserve to be paid differently for doing the same job.

Women are just as capable as men to do the jobs that we do, whether they are an actor/actress, a CEO, or a construction worker. Another subject that I am quite passionate about within womens' rights is reproductive rights. This includes access to birth control and access to abortion. It is hard to know if I would have an abortion if I were to get pregnant. I do not think I would be able to know that until I was in that situation. While I would like to think that I would not get an abortion, I do not think that I have the right to tell anyone else what to do with their body. There is a common misconception about being pro-choice. Being pro-choice does not mean being pro-abortion, it means allowing women to make their own decisions about their body. I feel that if you do not think abortion is right, then do not get an abortion. However, I think that if I wanted an abortion, I should be able to make that decision for myself.

This next one is an issue for many Christians. Homosexuality is often seen as a sin by many people. I do not think that it is a sin, I think that it is love. I believe that everyone should be able to love whomever they like as long as that someone is able to consent. I have this belief about the Bible that is widely accepted by many Christians. I believe that if man is flawed and man wrote the bible, it is quite likely that the Bible is flawed. I think that it is probable that man included some of their own agenda while writing the Bible. I always try to take what the Bible says with a grain of salt. I think that the harshness homosexuals receive from Christians is more sinful than actually being a homosexual could ever be. They are not safe to show affection in public and they constantly fear being attacked. There is no good way to fix this because it would involve changing peoples' minds about something they feel quite strongly about. I think that the best way to begin to fix this is educating people about what the Bible actually says and educating people on the subject of homosexuality.

As mentioned before, my community played a huge role in my definition of social justice. Before moving to Central, I had many beliefs that I no longer have today. When I lived in Benton, due to how I was raised and the people I was surrounded with, I thought that homosexuality was a sin. I was raised in a church and that is what I was taught. However, as I grew older and I began to know and talk to people who were gay, my views on the topic changed. I saw that these people had no intentions of being bad, they were just being themselves. They were just loving who God made them to love. Before moving to Central, I was also pro-life. I think that it was mainly because I was one of the people who thought that pro-choice equaled pro-abortion. After moving to Central, I met people who were pro-choice; they educated me on the topic and I switched over to pro-choice, but that does not mean that I am pro-abortion. I believe that women should have full control over their body.

Being a high school student can be pretty scary these days. Another view that came from my community is my view on guns/gun control. I believe that guns need to be regulated. As a student that has grown up with active shooter drills this topic is very close to my heart. Central is placed in a bad part of town in Little Rock, Arkansas. There were many times that my high school was put on lockdown. Fortunately, they all turned out to be false alarms. However, that is not the case for many U.S high school students. Many high school students have been able to get their hands on military grade weapons. No background checks and no age requirement. Many think that people who want gun control want to take all guns away. That is not true. I do not believe that anyone has any need for an assault rifle.



Social justice holds a special place in my heart. It makes me who I am today. I feel that social justice is central to who I am. I am thankful for my mentors and those who helped shaped my views. I hope that I can be part of the change that makes the world a better place than when I got here.

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