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Personal Manifesto: What is Social Justice?

Margaret Ann Donnell

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Maggie Donnell

Dr. Houser

Social Justice

13 December 2016

Personal Manifesto: What is Social Justice?

Senior year of high school was a time of growth for me. I began to define and understand who I wanted to be and why I was put on this Earth. My calling was summarized in one phrase: "Wake up every day asking not what you can do for yourself, but what can you do to serve others". The idea was to select a career path in which I could best serve others. This was an extensive process in regards to what I was passionate about and where I could best prepare myself for this work. As I was solidifying where I was going to continue my education and what I was going to study for the next four years, I realized that the best way to pursue this goal was through becoming a lawyer. Ouachita Baptist University seemed like the perfect place to earn my undergraduate degree, especially with the upcoming Social Justice degree plan that would be implemented my freshman year. In the time leading up to my first days in college, people would often ask, "What are you majoring in," and I was so proud to announce it as social justice... but when people asked what exactly that was, I did not have an answer. I had no idea how to explain it. Thankfully, because of this course and the work we have done, I am finally able to share with others exactly what I am studying and why it is so close to my heart. However grand it sounds, Social Justice is unobtainable. We are honestly never going to reach a point in which there is Social

Justice in and for all. The term itself is subjective and is influenced by multiple factors. It is critical that we examine a few of these aspects in order to try and reach a well-developed, full definition: history and its impact on later generations, identity both in self and within communities, and how best to approach situations in terms of humanity. However, even after reviewing these three parts, I still do not believe it receives the adequate definition it deserves; it is a complex notion that is in constant need of revising.

It is crucial to note, especially before we explore the three features, that one can pursue Social Justice from two directions: long-term and palliative. Long-term care includes observing what has and has not worked in the past that has led one to where they are now, but it also involves working with plans to take care of situations that arise in the future; it is an attempt to balance the effectiveness of items implemented in the past and solutions for the future that can adapt with the changing world. Many resolutions that provide long-term care are typically structure-based; those who follow this approach believe the best way to bring about real change is to address the problems at the core with the ones who create the policies that foster injustice among the people. The biggest concern when it comes to long-term care is going against tradition: this is the way it has always been... why change that. I believe it is a valid argument, to a degree, but I do have some bias as I know I am guilty of being a stickler for the precedent. However, it is important to consider the other option of care. Palliative care is making it so that life is easy. The purpose is to make one feel most comfortable whether that is through easing tension or decreasing environmental

stressors. One is not too concerned with how it affects others but only serving the one directly affected. The difficult part with palliative care is it only temporarily satisfies the need. Yes, for the time being all is well, but what happens when the situation is different and that person is placed in an undesirable position again? Palliative care requires constant attention and correction, which many are unable to follow-up with when needed the most. Deciding which direction best applies is completely determined by the situation, for both have their own strengths and weaknesses.

Whenever one hears the term Social Justice, one typically thinks of racism and the oppression that came about because of the prejudices that still linger. We thought we had achieved Social Justice in regards to race decades ago with the Civil War then with the Civil Rights Movement as a follow-up. Yet today there seems to be “residual trauma” by those who feel the effects of these defining times in our nation’s history; by definition, “residual trauma” is trauma from experience you did not go through yet someone who is like you did... in this case discrimination based on the color of their skin. Many would approach this with long-term care in mind, considering it was the structure of our government which started it all. But one of the biggest downfalls of our nation, and society as a whole, is that structures are difficult to get both in and out of. So that poses the question: are structures fixed in that representation within them is as limited as when they began? It is evident that even the make-up of our government is still feeling the rippling effects; although there has been progress, representation by the minorities is nearly the same as when our country formed. What is most difficult about this under-representation is the adults who have experienced the little change

throughout history: being raised on the stories and advice shared from their parents, having been in the middle of the fight with the Civil Rights Movement, and are now having to educate their own children to be aware that their history has a lasting impact and is an ongoing struggle. One such adult, Ta-Nevis Coates shares his personal statement on all that he has witnessed in his book *Between the World and Me*, written as a letter to his son: “I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past” (69). What is so heartbreaking is that Coates has taken on the role of personal responsibility to educate his son to treat all, both those from the past and those to come, with the same respect, most likely the respect he has not seen showed to those most like them. The role of personal responsibility, that Coates is pushing for his son, is knowing what is around you and to be aware that there will always be some prejudice, so it is imperative to watch your actions. Although this is advice between father and son, I think it is completely relevant, especially when speaking on Social Justice. Seeking Social Justice is done not only in part by those who feel the need to reconcile the past but is also being pushed by those who are most susceptible to the pain of the past; it is a group effort done through cooperation on both sides. For there to be cooperation, there must be some sense of identity, both one of self and what they stand for but also in the community they reside.

Identity is defined as the characteristics and attributes that distinguish either an individual or group from another. Finding one’s identity is crucial considering it is what makes somebody who they are; one needs to be confident in what they believe and

the person that they were meant to be. When discussing identity, we must keep in mind that there are two dominant forms: vertical and horizontal. One's distinct identity can only be thoroughly described as complete if it includes aspects from both ways; one's identity cannot solely be formed from just one of these alone. Vertical identities are the outward appearance and traits that are passed down from parents to their children; in scientific terms, this would be known as genetics. Generally, parents have a more difficult time handling these identities of their children, especially when it does not mirror themselves. Parents take pride in passing on positive attributes that encourage successful, and if their children, by any means, are different or not up to their standards, it causes tension between the two. Andrew Solomon, in his book *Far from the Tree*, discusses this strained relationship between parents, children, and the search for identity. He makes the point, "Our children are not us: ...and are subject right from the start to the environmental stimuli beyond our control" (1). By making this claim, he is reminding both himself and others, mainly the parents, that there are two parts to identity: the first being vertical, which we have already discussed, and horizontal. Horizontal identities are the beliefs and actions of one that are based on the environment around them. Horizontal identities typically come from the sub-communities we create based on similarity and familiarity with those we are around. We form communities to be a part of to fulfill a sense of need and belonging; the importance of finding community is to have connections with others and to create a cushion or comfort zone. This is important to mention as many will act like the majority, even if it is inhumane, just to continue being a part of the community they are, or

sometimes wish, to be with. Many acts of injustice come from conformity ... simply because they do not want to be alone.

One tends to underplay the role identity plays in humanity. It is often emphasized that one needs to clarify where their identity lies. But once this has been done, they are portrayed only in that light. Their perceived identity sets the degree of authority in all parts of their life but especially when the roles are reversed. This phenomenon was noted by Paul Kalanithi, a renowned neurosurgeon in training diagnosed with terminal cancer, in his memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*. As Kalanithi went from the doctor, who knew all the answers, to the patient, who supposedly did not have the slightest idea of what was happening, he came to realize that when no longer in the respectable role of the physician even his co-worker, the nurse who was treating him, did not recognize him in the way he believed he deserved: "Why was I so authoritative in a surgeon's coat but so meek in a patient's gown?" (5-6). By placing his identity solely in his career as a neurosurgeon, he made the mistake of forgetting that he is on the same level as his counterparts; the surgeon's coat does not make him greater than others. There is fault in believing that. Failing to remember that underneath that façade of who one wants to be seen as is a human being with hopes and fears and dreams leads to a shattering realization. This realization, though, enables one to reevaluate how they approach situations when they have the upper hand, just as Paul Kalanithi did after multiple cases in which he had built relationships with patients only to have them pass. As he reflected on the recent events he promised himself this: "From that point on, I resolved to treat all my paperwork as patients, and not vice

versa" (*When Breath Becomes Air*, 77). Once he humbled himself and realized that his patients were people's family members and loved ones, that they too had stories to be told, he saw his line of work in a new light. I feel as though this is an important message for justice seekers, like ourselves, to learn: the humanity of it all. We like to believe the solution is an end-all set-up, when really, what works for one may not work for others. We must keep in mind that these are not just helpless creatures who are incapable of help themselves, but rather, they are people who probably had their own visions of a future they did not get to see come true. When seeking social justice, we must not lose sight of the humanity of the individuals; we do not always have the best solution and should strive to see the circumstances from their viewpoint.

Evidently, it is no easy feat to define Social Justice. It is imperative that we approach it from different angles to attempt to have as complete of a definition we can make. Of course, we have only surfaced three of those: history and its impact on later generations, identity both in self and within communities, and how best to approach situations in terms of humanity. There are many other components that comprise social justice, both as the term itself and within the world we live. It is critical that we approach both the study and the pursuit of social justice both with knowledge and empathy. Education is so important in that it reveals what we really do not know, but it also confirms our role within the problems, whether we are the ones causing them or in a position to minimize them. But strictly knowing what to do is different from actively being amidst the fight. If we do not place ourselves in the shoes of the victims where they are in the present moment, we may overlook or underestimate the real problem at

hand. We must keep in mind past events and potential issues that could arise, but must never lose sight of the greater goal in mind: bettering situations for those who are in desperate need of justice whether within their society or self.

But how do I apply all the knowledge that I have gained in this class and implement it into my own life? Well, following my studies, I intend on working alongside the International Justice Mission in one of their field offices then coming back to the United States to practice either family or criminal law. It is perfectly understandable for one to question my reasoning for devoting my career to something in which I will never see the results of and why I continue in the fight that will never be won. Simply because Social Justice is unattainable does not give us any reason to not work for the betterment of others. I have been fortunate to be placed where I am and that I have the opportunity to help those who cannot help themselves, and it would be ridiculous of me to waste that. I get to wake-up each morning in an all-girls dorm without worrying about somebody intruding; I am surrounded by male friends and family members that could not even imagine taking advantage of me... yet there are girls half my age who are sold into sex-slavery every single day, and that is all they will ever know. I am well-aware that there will never be a day in which crime and slavery and oppression are no longer issues the human race faces and are tempted by. This class has opened my eyes to see injustice and all it encompasses and just how broken our world is. As discouraging as it may be to now be aware of all that is around me, the drive and passion for my line of work has increased so much more, and I am so thankful for that.

This year has helped me mature and find my place within this new community of justice seekers.