

Voices from the Field of Social Justice

Defining Moments in Our Professional Journeys

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Introduction

In these counternarratives, the readers will hear accounts of day-to-day realities of being a professional that will help prepare them in their professional roles as educators and counselors, in particular, the educational life experiences that influenced their professional development. Each of us reflects on our life—as persons and as counselors—and shares a significant life-altering event and salutary moment that influenced who we are as a professional, therapist, and educator, redefining or affirming our oppressed identities (disability, gender, ethnicity, race, age, and sexuality). As authors, we further share how this life experience was educational and how

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it influenced our professional identity, development, and work as social justice advocates.

Our voices convey hope, disappointment, fear, pride, and struggle that makes us unique and yet similar to others in the field. From our cultural identity lenses, we will use our years of experience to show the readers how to apply the most recent education and counseling social justice theories, competencies, and guidelines to professional practice and teaching, specifically with culturally diverse people.

Further, the article offers affirmation and guidance to those interested in working in the broad field of social justice as researchers, educators, activists, practitioners, or professionals, aimed for those who would appreciate accounts of firsthand experience. We share data that support our experiences, provide professional development for those in our fields, and make strong recommendations for those interested in social justice.

Social Justice Advocacy and Transformative Leadership

Advocacy, specifically *social justice advocacy*, and *transformative leadership* are the two guiding notions that set the framework for our social justice work. Social justice advocacy and transformative leadership tenets are closely connected to social justice through their shared belief in building advocacy and identifying, transforming, and eradicating systems that generate inequity, disparity, and social injustice.

In addition, like social justice models, *transformative leadership* and *social justice advocacy* are concerned with empowerment, human rights, distributive and structural social justice, and creative capitalism. Thus, we offer both *social justice advocacy* and *transformative leadership* as theoretical lenses to examine the narratives of our defining moments and, more

importantly, our quest for social justice for those individuals we seek to serve.

Social Justice Advocacy

Simply put, *social justice advocacy* is activism against oppression and discrimination, particularly within social and political contexts. Furthermore, social justice advocacy is geared toward systemic change of oppressive systems with political, economic, and social structures in institutions and societies. According to Nilsson and Schmidt (2005), social justice advocacy is “organized efforts aimed at influencing public attitudes, policies, and laws to create a more socially just society guided by a vision of human rights including political, economical, and social rights” (p. 267).

Keeping that definition in mind, social justice advocacy tools are interventive, preventive, and postventive, and extend to outreach, empowerment, and direct political intervention activities (Crethar, Torres, Rivera, & Nash, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2007). Examples of social justice advocacy are community organizing, media campaigns, lobbying, and personal efforts on behalf of an individual.

Closely aligned with our social justice work beyond transformative leadership and social justice advocacy are critical theories: race, gender, and feminist. Foundationally, our social justice effort is steeped in the work of legendary activists such as bell hooks, Jacqueline Jackson, Audre Lorde, Alice Rossi, and Alice Walker and the critical philosophies of intellectuals and social justice scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson, Geneva Gay, Linda Darling-Hammond, Jacqueline Irvine, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Cornel West and the scholarly work of others such as Dantley and Tillman, (2006); Lopez, (2003); Marshall and Oliva, (2006); and Shields, (2010).

Moreover, our social justice work embraces the concepts of cultural and social reproduction and transformational and

transactional leadership. Last, as practitioners and educators of social justice advocacy, specifically those of us who are mental health clinicians, we are guided by the *advocacy competencies* (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002) adopted by the American Counseling Association.

Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership builds on both transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Like transformational leadership, transformative leadership's fundamental aim is transforming and changing something. According to Burns (1978), transactional leadership is concerned with "the means of leading, whereas transformational leadership is more focused on end-values and moral purposes such as liberty, justice, equality" (p. 426).

Transformative leadership, however, takes transformational leadership a step further by focusing on systemic change and critiquing and challenging inequities, social injustices, and those inappropriate misuses of power and privilege that create and perpetuate inequity, disparity, and injustice. It holds as its key values liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice, making the goal of transformative leadership individual, organizational, and societal transformation.

In essence, transformative leadership calls for a overhauling and revolutionizing of human and social systems and the need to deconstruct and reconstruct privileged frameworks to ones that are more equitable and culturally grounded (Burns, 1978; King & Biro, 2000; Taylor, 2006). Thus, it emphasizes deep and equitable change in social conditions.

According to Shields (2010), transformative leadership begins with those material realities and disparities outside the organization that impinge on the success of individuals, groups, and organizations as wholes. The processes of change consist of deconstruction and reconstruction of social and cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity, acknowledge power and privilege, and serve as a dialectic between individual and social.

For us, transformative leadership is a tool to transform the realities and lived experiences of the individuals we serve (students, clients, systems, and families), especially those who are oppressed and without voice. We aim to use our positions, titles, status, and power to address the inequities, disparities, and social injustices both here in the U.S. and abroad.

From a transformative leadership

framework, power is viewed as positional, hegemonic, and a tool for oppression, as well as a tool for action. Shields (2010) postulates that transformative leadership holds the most promise and potential to meet both the academic and the social justice needs of complex, diverse, and beleaguered education systems. In that manner, we are called to be transformative leaders—to engage in social change, social justice advocacy, and ultimately, in social justice.

As a final point, we offer our narratives as counternarratives and as a technique (from a nonpositivist perspective) rather than as a research method. According to Erickson (1986), what makes research interpretive or qualitative is substantive focus and intent, rather than a procedure in data collection. Hence, in an effort to share our intuitive meanings of our defining moments in our social justice work and what they have meant to us, each author presents a descriptive narrative of a defining moment in social justice from his or her unique experience and perception.

Our intent is to illustrate through these stories, using a nonpositivist, interpretative approach, the important role transformative leadership and social justice advocacy can play in achieving social justice for our students, our clientele, and, ultimately, our world.

Just Like Me: A Stand for Justice

aretha faye marbley

Fourteen years ago, during the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, the darkest period in our country's contemporary history, there was an equally dark moment in my academic career. It is still hard for me to believe that I was called to my Chair's office, reported to the Dean, Chancellor, and to the President of my University with allegations of attacking the United States and the men and women who served in the Armed Forces. Yet, this incident became a catalyst for my growth and that of my students.

My academic journey has been rocky with some particularly rough spots. I have received more than my fair share of challenges to and attacks on my intelligence, abilities, and credibility from my students—"microaggressions, those commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, derogatory racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal et al., 2007, p. 271).

If I were not a descendent of strong ancestors, both Native American and

African, and knowing their struggles for education, civil liberties, social justice, and most importantly, freedom, I could not have endured those pretense years in the academy. In short, being a professor in a predominantly White institution meant that I was standing on the heads and shoulders of giants.

Like most of the country and the world, September, 11, 2001 was a day that I will always remember. I entered my 6 p.m. Counseling class, already weighed down, frustrated, and visibly shaken by the televised images of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. These images of exploding Twin Towers, Building 7 falling, and people falling and jumping from the burning towers were exploding in my soul and spirit. I had just returned from yet another moving and unified patriotic rally/prayer vigil for our country, the 9/11 victims, and families of victims.

Faculty members had received an earlier e-mail from the Provost regarding the trauma of the attack on the World Trade Center and the devastating effect it may be having on our students. In his memo, he suggested faculty consider taking a few moments of classroom time to process this calamity with students. With the exception of one Hispanic, one Jewish, one African American, one Asian American, and one Arab American student, the rest of my students were White American.

Before I could open my mouth, Gwen, a 40ish White female student had instigated a verbally violent assault on Islam and the Arab nations, ranting and raving about bombing them all. In between her attacks, in a show of patriotism, she reverted to a passionate speech about the wonderful and awesome attributes of Americans and how the world so loved and respected the United States. Her words painted the Arabs and Muslims as evil while portraying Americans as blameless of any evil acts—leaving no room for any other opposing viewpoints.

I stood there for a moment in shock, mindful of the students of color that sat trapped in the quagmire. Sitting in my class were the African American student (and me) whose ancestors were products of transatlantic slavery in America and me a direct product of Jim Crow; a Chinese student whose ancestors were exploited and victimized in America during the building of the transcontinental railroad; the multiple scapegoating of my Jewish student's ancestors; and my Hispanic student who knew of the contemporary exploitation, attacks, and discrimination towards

Mexican immigrants—all at the hands of Americans, mostly White Americans.

I was torn between my angst and the pain and the deep respect I felt for our grieving nation and the need to shut her up and stop this vicious and warped attack on innocent people. My body was frozen, my mind overwhelmed, soul seared, spirit laden, vision bleared, heart heavy, and yet my mouth opened to speak some truths. To Gwen and the class I posited that “America is a beautiful country, the best place in the world to live and I love it dearly, but Americans have done some atrocious things to its own people and people in other countries all over the world.”

I stressed that we are not innocent, blameless, or “loved by everyone in the world.” With those words, I stood up for everyone in the class (White and of color), for those who died and were injured in 9/11, for the Muslims and Arabs who would be attacked in the months and years that followed, for our soldiers who would lose life and limb, for the innocent people in Iraq and Iran, for our American Democracy, and for our country’s amazing resiliency and redeeming strength to overcome its own ugly past, grief of 9/11, and ability to stand as leaders in the 21st Century. Um...Just like me, just like me.

What Happens in Vegas— Stays in Texas?

Fred A. Bonner II

This time I will use *Evite* instead of *Doodle*—somehow this scheduling medium seems a lot less academic and a world more user-friendly for the folks who are going to help me usher in this new phase in my life. *Forty and Full* is what I called it—this celebration in this Year of twenty09—of 40 years of my life that seemed to pass by with the speed of an oncoming locomotive. It seems like just yesterday I was commenting to my cohort of friends that the new weekly series *30 Something* that at that time was airing on prime time television, was much ado about a bunch of old folks—who cares about that geriatric crew—now how I longed for the scent of 32, full of the essence of youthful exuberance and a lack of the legion of adult responsibilities that seemed to attach to age 40 like filings to a magnet.

Yes, *Forty and Full*—a meeting in Las Vegas to celebrate, commemorate, appreciate, reverberate on the age and professional markers that framed my very existence. Being promoted to professor at the age of 40—I felt a sense of accomplishment and a quiet resolve that I had “arrived.” Yet my

arrival came with a concomitant reflection on my journey. Had I mortgaged too much and saved too little of “me” in this process of becoming—of trying to reach the brass academic ring?

As my mind vacillated between feelings of excitement about my accomplishments and feelings of trepidation that part of my being had been one of the things I had “lost in the fire,” a sense of calm came over me as I took inventory of how I had lived my academic and professional life—my defining moment. In the African American church, there’s a song that repeats the haunting refrain—*If I can help somebody as I travel along, then my living has not been in vain.*

Mine had been a life committed to helping others transgress against marginalizing structures that constrained opportunities and crushed dreams. By focusing on those who were defined as “children of a lesser God”—African American males who happened to be academically gifted, but academically absent in critical education discourse—my career had been centered on telling a very different narrative. Moving the field beyond looking at differences as deficits, I wanted to tell the world that these brothers could have “swagga” and “smarts.”

But, in so doing—in following my convictions to pursue a research agenda that the majority would not only understand but also grow to appreciate—was potentially playing a game of Russian roulette with my career. “You need to make sure you are publishing in venues that White folks will read”—the words that one of my senior White colleagues told me early in my first tenure-track position. So had the proverbial “chickens come home to roost?” Had my influence actually caused White folks to step outside of their comfort zones to pick up a few of the publication outlets that I called home? Did the approval of those White folks even matter?

What I quickly realized in this moment—my defining moment—was that these questions I was posing to myself had far outlived their usefulness—if they had ever been useful in the first place. Why was I continuing to hold myself hostage to these arbitrary and capricious—perhap fictitious—“folks” who somehow continued to hold sway in my life and who could summarily deem a life’s worth of work as unacceptable because it fell outside of some random norm of what constituted “good” work?

No longer—no more—at this moment, at this point in time—from this point forward, I decided that I would no longer engage in negotiating identity but begin to navigate

blessings. I no longer had a use for the constant negotiation of my identity—my identity as an academician, scholar, intellectual, researcher. It was time for me to occupy my new house—the one that sheltered blessings and goodness.

The years of negotiating my identity had proven as familiar as sliding into my favorite slippers and as comfortable as putting on my favorite coat—all learned behaviors meted out in an environment that said that to be competent was to learn to become something that was often diametrically opposed to who I was and how I was raised. You always help people, Fred, sometimes you have to sacrifice yourself for the benefit of others—the lesson my family taught. You don’t waste your time trying to meet other people’s agendas—all that counts at the end of the day is the number of peer-reviewed publications you have—the lessons that the Academy advanced. You are a blessing to us just the way you are—the lesson that my family taught. You are only as valuable as your last accomplishment—the lesson that the Academy shared. This point/counterpoint experience was being recapitulated in my engagement with higher education again and again—but, no more.

No more negotiating my identity—being who I was and bringing all that I had to bear on the academy was the only way to exist. The blessings that I had been provided by remaining true to my beliefs and resolute in my agenda had provided me the residual capital to spend and acquire wealth (metaphorically speaking) in the academic marketplace—enough to purchase full professor. No more negotiation—time to navigate blessings. As I smile and hmm, I think to myself—I finally know the meaning behind that song my Grandmother use to sing—*“This joy that I have...the world didn’t give it to me—the world didn’t give it, the world can’t take it away.”*

Wow! What a major intellectual shift I had undergone. Not as I sat listening to some distinguished lecturer pontificate in some random lecture hall, but in a Las Vegas hotel room. This shift has meant all the difference in the way that I now approach my academic and professional life. I think what happened in Vegas, shouldn’t stay in Vegas. I think I’ll bring it back to Texas with me.

The Bubble Burst

Petra A. Robinson

I enjoyed living in my comfortable bubble. I hated watching the news, despised

politics, and while I was aware of societal inequalities and complexities, I much preferred spending my life, and especially my discretionary time, away from reading, watching, or hearing sad stories about hard life. I justified not reading by using excuses that I did enough reading at work. I deliberately stayed away, not for a lack of empathy or compassion, as I was angered often, cried a lot, and bore much heartache when I witnessed instances of corruption or oppression.

However, I was somehow convinced that I was better off being shielded in my bubble, particularly because I felt helpless. After all, what difference could I make? What could I do or say to make any mark on life's greatest problems of inequity? I enjoyed my life being in my bubble, or so I thought. I was aware of my bubble—my husband often mocked me because of it, but I thought I was living a better quality of life. I was wrong.

Today, things have changed and are continually changing. I no longer thrive in ignorance and the false sense of security of my bubble. Critical self-reflection has shown that I came to the United States for doctoral work from Jamaica as a Black, female, international student—identities of which I was hardly aware. I slowly started to recognize certain privileges I once enjoyed in my home country. Quickly, I learned that I was an “other,” an outsider from a “weed-loving and weed-smoking” alien place; I learned my role, I learned my place—I learned my position, or as we call it in academe, my “positionality.”

My bubble popped loudly when I decided to face up to this new reality. Now I know the bubble was just a shield for enjoying certain privileges that are now inconsequential. Now I know the practical difference between the concept of being treated fairly and being treated equally.

I feel shame that not until doctoral level studies did I grab hold of a transformational eureka moment, despite the discomfort that came with it, and grasped the idea that being treated equally did not necessarily mean the same thing as being treated fairly. Admittedly a work in progress, I no longer simply cringe at the thought of the axiomatic, the status quo, the unquestioned, the unquestionable, and the systematic or institutional structures, which in design appear to be equitable but are indeed unfair.

I credit my overall doctoral experience with inspiring me to believe I could in fact make a difference and even if it were small, it would still be important. I espe-

cially credit my professor of a special topics class (The Intersectionality of Race, Class, Gender and Sexual Orientation in Adult Education) with helping me to develop an acute awareness to the intersections of various oppressive structures related to issues of race, class, gender, color, ability, age, and sexual orientation.

It was a Saturday morning in the fall of 2007 when I had my critical defining moment. I sat in shock and horror as I watched a video of intimate personal stories (from people who looked like me) that voiced experiences about the challenges faced with the traditional African American Church because of their sexual orientation. Coming from a very Christian yet very homophobic country, I was torn as I had found solace and comfort in the church, the place that taught me the lessons of unconditional love, yet it was the place that also taught me about the sinful nature of homosexuality.

At first, I thought this was not applicable to me inasmuch as I was not ridiculing anyone or withholding any of their rights. I was ambivalent to say the least but now I was challenged. I had to question my values and my inherent prejudices toward a group of people, who, like me, deserved the same regard and opportunity regardless of their sexual orientation. I was at a crossroads. I found myself riddled with guilt; I reflected on some of the music I sang and danced along to and felt nauseated. I was angered at myself for the prejudice I had learned and perpetuated, and my world as I knew it changed.

I heard a mother passionately talk about her son, her gay son, who died from AIDS. Her simple words were filled with a divine and pointed wisdom that called for a better world, one in which the beauty inside all of us as well as our unique differences were celebrated.

The overall course provided a unified framework for helping me to understand and critically analyze several forms of social oppression as well as the parallels and interconnections among them. By working with issues of diversity with the overarching theme of social justice throughout the semester, I have achieved a deeper understanding of my role in academia.

As a young scholar, I am excited at the prospect of using my work and role as a platform for anti-discrimination, particularly through helping to engender critical thinking skills among my students and to promote social justice through my research and scholarship. My goals are not lofty; what I hope to do is to work with other so-

cial justice advocates who are engaging in professional discourse and practical work to promote social justice and to highlight insidious structures that reproduce bias and oppression in society.

Beyond the Impasse: Developing Female Professional and Personal Identity in Academe

Kathleen Phelan

Being a product of poverty and a broken home, estranged from my biological father, and as a survivor of rape, I learned that by virtue of being a female, I am subdued by the strong tides of gender oppression that exist both outside and sometimes within the academe. While realizing that nothing truly accounts for the vulnerabilities experienced by being marginalized, throughout my academic career and with silent determination, I searched for bits of reason and knowledge that would help free me from and account for this state of being the lesser of two sexes. I searched silently for ways to discover value in being female so that I could integrate that value into my academic development and identity.

My moment of impasse beyond inferiority occurred the first class day of the spring 2008 semester. That day, I discovered for the first time in my life that abandoning my female identity, and the oppressive associations made to it, was not the key to professional growth. Rather, that as a female born into poverty, neglect, and consequently sexual oppression, the fruition of my personal identity lay waiting for a strong and clear awakening.

That spring semester day, I routinely entered the classroom, seated myself, and waited on the professor to arrive. I had not expected a woman to walk through the door who would transform my vulnerabilities into strengths, thereby allowing me to redefine my identity. With clarity and an ease of confidence, she introduced herself as a feminist, social justice activist, and proceeded to identify through her discourse, with each of us, her students. Her directives were bold, yet her tone was colored by the poetic verses of enlightenment, and through her words the many years of my accumulated unanswered questions became answered.

As I listened to her poignantly speak and watched her poised before the class, I experienced a flooding of biased norms that I had learned as a female adolescent and adult. Such as to prioritize my outward appearance if I am to attract a male,

who will in turn lift me from poverty, and to this I heard her call out “oppression”; that ladies do not speak out of turn, let alone tell anyone they have been raped, and this I heard her label “repression”; to underscore my femininity for sexuality in order to keep a man, and to this, I heard her words “discrimination”; and to conceal my fears and weaknesses in order to fit into the dominant society, to which I heard her voice “injustice.”

I was so moved by her womanhood that I did not leave her class that afternoon without shaking her hand and thanking her. I remember telling her, “It is an honor to meet you,” which was the first time in my life I had ever felt so compelled to express to a professor such a strong degree of admiration, respect, honor, and awe. I left her class that day knowing what it means to be a woman.

Since that time, my identity as a female, both professionally and personally, has been reframed and chartered in an effort to reach out and share understanding and acceptance with other females. I now believe women have, by necessity and demand, had to acquire a unique strength for navigating through life, and finding congruency within our personal and professional lives. The experience of knowing and being influenced by a strong female role model, my professor, reiterates to me how vastly important it is for women to identify with each other on the basis of a stronghold in reality coupled with a depth of understanding and acceptance. This knowledge comes not only by virtue of being female scholars, but from the unique wisdom they impart.

In addition, I learned that by forming and nurturing a protective armor around my female identity, I allow myself room to grow as a person and as a professional within the academy. For example, protecting my female identity as a professional, a form of social empowerment plays against the stereotype of accepting me as the lesser of two sexes. This allows my personal female identity to remain fluid and adaptive.

The strength-building process of nurturing a female identity provides an opportunity to guide other females, by example, through the development of their own self-identification processes just as my professor had guided me. Recognizing the personal need to be understood and valued as a female, both personally and professionally, frees development of the female identity from the strong tides of oppression, repression, discrimination, and injustice.

Pass It On

Hal Stevens

I am a 65-year-old White able-bodied heterosexual male. I am a Vietnam veteran from rural New England. My father would be considered a blue collar worker. My mother came from an agricultural setting. I was raised Congregationalist and taught to obey authority unquestionably. Our state license plate used to read “Live Free or Die.” My town was as far as I know 100% White except when the migrant workers came to town to pick apples. I entered college at the local state college as a first generation college student.

During my first year on campus, it was announced that there was a small group of protestors who were against the war that was starting in Vietnam. I, along with about a half dozen friends, decided to start what we considered a “pro U.S.” counterdemonstration. We were able to muster several thousand other students to counterdemonstrate. The demonstration went well beyond what we had expected, and many of the counterdemonstrators engaged in behavior I was embarrassed about, such as throwing eggs at the peace demonstrators.

My picture, along with several of my friends, ended up in the statewide conservative newspaper. When I returned home, I was a little nervous that my parents might react to my activities, but I was wrong, and my father, in particular, seemed particularly proud.

Fast forward to that summer. My folks rented a spot in a campground where we spent most of the summer. I remember one day sitting with a friend of mine who I had known for several years from the campsite, relaying to her some of what transpired during the protest of the Vietnam war while I was at college. She stopped when I was about done and asked me the poignant question, “What side were you on?” I answered quite indignantly that I was on the pro-U.S. side. Her response took me by surprise (even today, I can still hear her saying), “That’s funny; I pictured you being on the other side.” Wow, her perception of me was more acute than my own perception.

I don’t remember where the conversation went after that, but I do know I started to question my own perception of my reality. I ended up flunking out of school. Still formulating my beliefs and the strength of my beliefs, I joined the National Guard with some intent of avoiding the draft and returning to school. I ended up being activated and making a tour of duty in

Vietnam as a cannoneer. Throughout this time, I was in turmoil about my beliefs and values.

My growing awareness of my privilege has not been quite as distinctive. I have many privileged identities, and my being raised in such a homogenous environment has not afforded me early opportunities to understand these and my socioeconomic lack of privilege (in context) was something of which I was more aware. I am also aware that in some ways, it is easier to acknowledge how I am oppressed than to admit that I might be an oppressor. I do know that my maleness and Whiteness affords me some credibility in talking to majority populations about multicultural issues that my female colleagues and colleagues of color often do not have.

I also am aware there is a point where those audiences start to minimize my message as well by identifying the topics as “his thing,” that is, if you buy the metaphor that questions whether fish realize that water is their environment. For me personally, I am often unaware of the privilege I have because it seems to be my water and it is hard to imagine that others don’t live in the same water.

Culture Shock

Jiaqi Li

I was born in the late 1970s on the verge of the Chinese economic reform. Due to the one-child policy in China, I was the only son, and all of my family members took much care of me. Accordingly, self-centeredness became an outgrowth of such an unfettered and spoiled lifestyle. Meanwhile, as a Chinese citizen, schools and teachers spared no effort to inculcate nationalism, patriotism, Marxism, and communism into my mind.

For that reason, I naturally believed that so-called social justice, racism, and discrimination only occurred in Western countries and their people are suffering every day. Ostensibly, I had a desirable job, supportive family, and good reputation in the society in China, and I indeed had a strongly biased view of the people, and insisted that human nature is intrinsically corrupt.

Yet, circumstances alter cases; for example, I resigned my job and came to the United States in 2006. I remember experiencing symptoms of cultural shock during the fifth or sixth week of moving to the United States. I was frustrated, isolated, and looking at identifying all the inefficiencies of the American system, I hated the local culture which I saw as slow,

bureaucratic, cumbersome, and unfriendly. And the education I received in China reinforced my idea that I was destined to be helpless because the U.S. is a capitalist country.

Fortunately, I met a White American couple, around 50 years old, who kindly invited me to their home to talk about my experiences. They took care of me like my parents, so I was able to make a much better adjustment. I still remember often arguing with them on the theological concept of the existence of God, albeit with my limited English. Nonetheless, they were very nice and always listened patiently and respectfully. I appreciated them.

As time went by, I gradually realized that American people seemed to be different from what my Chinese textbooks and teachers told me in the past. Moreover, I found that local people, though religious, were actually friendly and kind. Because I had experienced acceptance instead of discrimination in this society, I discovered that I was self-absorbed, biased, and in need of deliverance, and badly needed to change my erroneous opinion toward the United States and its people.

However, there was one particular incident that made me feel perplexed and disappointed. I had a White landlord who was tall, handsome, and was at first so kind and friendly that I totally misjudged him. I clearly remember the day my landlord became impatient and started to insult and swear and cuss at my roommate (another new Chinese student) over a language communication problem about our rental lease. My roommate and I were shocked and had no idea how to respond to the rude remarks directed toward us. Due to cultural differences, we thought the incident may have been rooted in language barriers—but for us, this was a cultural shock. My roommate even blamed himself for what happened.

Unfortunately, my roommate went back to China. However, now that I understand social injustices, if given the chance to speak to him again, I would assure him that the incident with the landlord was not his fault but was instead blatant racism and discrimination. I have learned that as international students, we may experience discrimination in this country that may cause some of us to leave. However, I know that whether we stay or leave, it is imperative, if not for us, then for other international students coming to U.S. campuses, that we learn to stand up for dignity and stand up against those types of discrimination.

Social Injustices and Power

Our approach is consistent with Cooper and Gause's (2007) stance,

Transformative leadership constitutes a form of liberatory political praxis, whereby leaders use their positional power to promote democracy, redress inequities, and empower various stakeholders, including marginalized students and families. Through collaborative methods, leaders then develop inclusive governing structures and communities. (p. 200)

Simply put, as transformative leaders, we are charged to take social justice advocacy to the highest level of leadership—we are indeed activist leaders, living with tension and challenge, and a level of leadership that requires activism and moral courage.

Accordingly, examples of social justice advocacy and transformative leadership are manifested in all of our defining moments. That is, our activism and voices against oppression and discrimination within both social and political contexts—and even internal contexts—utilized our socially constructed biases and isms to lead to systemic change within political, economic, and social structures and oppressive systems within academia, as well as in domestic and international societies.

Our experiences, evident in the above narratives, highlight historical and ongoing patterns of social injustices perpetuated by hegemony and sometimes by invisible forces and structures of power. For example, Stevens compares his awareness of (and the taking for granted of) his male, White privilege to a metaphor that questions whether fish realize that water is their environment. He stated, "I am often unaware of the privilege I have because it seems to be my water, and it is hard to imagine others don't live in the same water."

Marbley's stand against injustice is an example of advocacy for not only her students within the social context of the classroom, but more broadly to include the political context that encircled the racial and ethnic tensions simmering and exploding in the United States and throughout the world during and following the 9/11 attack, a menacing threat to the lives of Arab Americans and international Arab people.

Li's defining moment also reflects on the discrimination and biases against international people. The information he learned because of the unwarranted attack on his roommate was a major catalyst to

his consequent advocacy for social justice, and his avid vow to fight against the blatant hatred and ugliness launched against international students.

Bonner, Stevens, Phelan, and Robinson share defining moments that began on the inside and resonated outward to shape their professional social justice work. Bonner's reflection on the cost of tenure is juxtaposed against his family's legacy to do good in the world. He shared that, "Mine had been a life committed to helping others transgress against marginalizing structures that constrained opportunities and crushed dreams."

Stevens wrote that throughout his tour of duty in Vietnam, he was in "turmoil about my beliefs and values." Looking back, he discovered that his internal struggle and sense of social justice, starting with the controversy of the Vietnam War, prompted his quest to understand and acknowledge his male and White privilege and his role as an oppressor, and conversely, his ultimate commitment to social justice and social advocacy.

Similarly, Phelan acknowledges her internal struggle to embrace her womanhood and the oppression and oppressive messages that she received as a result of being female. For Phelan, this defining moment where she was able to integrate her feminine identity led to advocacy work on behalf of women and feminist issues. She wrote, "The strength-building process of nurturing a female identity provides for an opportunity to guide other females, by example, through the development of their own self-identification processes."

When her bubble burst, Robinson decided to face up to what she referred to as this new reality—the societal inequalities, specifically the unfair and inequitable treatment of the gay community. She also had to acknowledge her own privileges and biases and even those views of sin and homosexuality that she inherited from her upbringing in a very Christian yet very homophobic country. In the end, she had to come to grips with the biases directed toward her as a Black, female, and international person from Jamaica.

As a final point, each author has demonstrated a commitment to transformative leadership and social change, social justice advocacy, and social justice in his or her professional and academic careers. Each has shown a commitment and history of systemic change and an activist record of challenging inequities, social injustices, and misuses of power and privilege. Each author recognizes the need to overhaul and

revolutionize human and social systems and to deconstruct and reconstruct privileged frameworks to ones that are more equitable and culturally grounded.

Conclusion

These stories involve great risk for us as we have divulged intimate thoughts and feelings. Sharing these stories has required that we critically examine and reflect on our own position in relation to “dehumanizing sociopolitical processes” in our lives (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, p. xvii). As we share our unguarded narratives, we hope to engage the audience—you, the reader—so you can access, through our experiences, a deeper understanding of social injustices. It is our hope that these narratives can serve as lessons to teach about difference and to motivate toward social change—social transformation toward social justice advocacy.

Meaningful communication and dialogue are necessary to address areas of concern, and for purposes of this article, we have dared to share our experiences to provide frameworks to highlight, analyze, and challenge various forms of systematic oppression and discrimination. These stories will hopefully serve to contextualize our experiences as counternarratives against oppression in favor of social justice while inspiring hope in other educators, counselors, and activists who strive for social change by valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion. In short, we hope for more transformative leadership and leaders.

What is unique to us is that we have taken time to reflect on and share those defining moments that have shaped us and our work. Reflected in the shared

narratives are convictions and personal callings to do social justice, and to do so with immediacy and with a strong sense of urgency.

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