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Into the Storm

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Abstract: Many colleges profess a deep commitment to teaching the values of social justice by simply following laws and then using compliance as evidence of building inclusive community. This essay considers practical outcomes for the authentic and compassionate teaching of social justice issues by presenting two (2018 and 2019) seven-week honors offerings that examine minimally stipulated laws and the ways they are enacted by encouraging students to engage in contemporary and historical discourses on the subject. Challenging honors educators to reexamine legal philosophies, historical precedence, and their role in the academy, the author argues for the moral obligation of honors to lead institutions through paradigmatic shifts in teaching social justice and activism. A description of curriculum is presented.

Keywords: social justices—study & teaching; honors education; activism; law; Columbus State University (GA)—Honors College

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My first position in education was as an undergraduate paid intern in the truancy office at the local high school. Thirty-three years later, I have worked at seven different institutions in four states. For the last nine years, I have been working at Columbus State University (CSU) in Columbus, Georgia, as their late-night reference supervisor at the Schwob Library. I also serve as an honors college instructor, where I teach social justice classes not only for my own edification but also as part of the recruitment process for the honors program.

My pedagogy was developed during my upbringing in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and is rooted in the teaching of the church, a love for clean blue lakes, and a deep belief in fair wages and health care for all. I have been influenced by a wide group of people including professors, trappers, nuns, sailboat captains, nurses, chaplains, and winter soldiers.

In times of social unrest and crisis, most institutions batten down the hatches and look for a safe harbor. However, I believe that we need to sail into the storm. Our renewed and invigorated national conversation about social justice should cause us to look deeply into our souls. For example, three major legal events completely changed campuses: the Civil Right Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010. The laws have had a powerfully positive effect, and we do the aims of these landmark social justice laws a disservice when we think only about what we are mandated to enforce. Such a philosophy can leave a hole in our soul. For example, we should *want* to have elevators, parking, and ramps for our students with disabilities instead of behaving as if these accommodations were a huge burden. We should celebrate the day that de facto apartheid was ended upon the integration of our institutions rather than act as if integration were something forced by “Yankees up north.”

The social justice classes that I taught in the fall of 2018 and 2019 were probably the best-received classes that I have ever been a part of. During my time working at CSU, I came to understand how little academic space is devoted explicitly to exploring social justice concerns, and students seemed to be craving the opportunity to talk about social justice issues as part of their academic curriculum. In my class, the students were on a seven-week journey that interwove contemporary issues with historical issues. Classroom activities ran the gamut: reading passages from Ellison’s *Invisible Man*; watching clips about the Vietnam Veterans Against the War movement and the Winter Soldier Investigation of 1971; studying the impact of Colin Kaepernick kneeling; and watching clips from the movies *Jojo Rabbit*, *The Producers*, and *The Great Dictator*. We also studied contemporary and archived cartoons from *The New Yorker*, looked at old yearbooks and newspaper photos, watched clips from *The Rundown with Robin Thede*, and listened to famous songs such as “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday.

Those of us who teach about social justice can feel that we are on an endless spinning wheel. In May of 2020, George Floyd was killed by police, leading to a national dialogue about the intersection between racism and criminal justice reform. Fast forward to August of 2020, and we saw players in the NBA take part in a three-day boycott due to the killing of Jacob Blake by police. Institutions all over the nation struggled with trying to find a safe, public response to show that they advocate social justice while navigating a complex political game.

I believe that, unfortunately, the power structures that govern many of our universities look at social justice issues the same way most people look

at their health and wellness. In other words, social justice is only important in times of crisis. Sickness is going to come for all of us, and it can take many forms that include Parkinson's disease, cancer, strokes, arthritis, and multiple sclerosis. When the winds of sickness come, they come with vengeance. Most people are shocked to find out what life is like behind the curtain when they become members of a subgroup with a disability, yet doctors, researchers, therapists, and other professionals who work for the good of the human condition have told us again and again that we can't wait to care about health and well-being until someone famous falls ill or dies unexpectedly. Instead, health care is a national concern that deserves sustained national attention.

What drives people who don't have Parkinson's to advocate passionately on behalf of people who do? I often think about my old rowing coach who flew to Israel to watch the trial of Adolf Eichmann in April of 1961. Why does a man who runs a summer fly fishing business take two months off during his busy season to fly to Israel? True, he was a soldier who took part in the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp, but many soldiers liberated camps, and they did not fly to see the trial in person. When family members came home from Vietnam disgusted by the war, he marched with them in Washington, D.C., to protest the war. At my coach's funeral, his stepson told the audience one of my coach's famous aphorisms, which was that his trip to Israel was the most incredible educational experience of his life, but, unfortunately, he did not know what he'd learned.

Sailing into a storm can be complex. For example, in my last honors class, we spent some time talking about CSU's relationship with Jim Crow since the university had started as a segregated college in 1958. The college had embraced confederacy culture by naming their mascot The Rebel and waving the confederate flag at all major events, including commencement, until the early 1970s. The students had a powerful and visceral reaction to old year-book pictures showing these moments from CSU's past, a reaction that led to intense debate.

The session about CSU's relationship with Jim Crow especially hit a nerve with the students who were serving as orientation leaders. They had been representing CSU without taking time to think about the university's history. CSU is quiet about its past and whitewashes its history as much as it can. The orientation leaders in the class started taking the first steps in a complex journey of dealing with the moral compromises that we make in working for flawed institutions. I believe that we all need to be thinking daily about how we as social justice advocates can help bring change to our universities while navigating the flaws we do not have the power to change.

But we can and should not be taking this journey alone. Like my rowing coach, our institutions should take pilgrimages to holy lands where they search for their souls. What would an Eichmann-like trial look like in which the leaders of our colleges would have to plead guilty to defending the past sins of a college? Can a defense be that the college was just following orders? I believe that only our embrace of “justice for all” allows us to become whole, or as my old law professor would say, it is not the bricks but what is between the bricks that holds us together.

One of my most vocal critics of the course was a history professor who argued that engaging in such debate was “just riling up” students. For me, as an honors college instructor, I feel that I am duty-bound to teach by certain principles. I believe that we, as honors college professionals, can lead our institutions and fellow staff members into a new social justice paradigm shift if we look for truth within the truth and if we do not fear the storm.

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