
LEARNING TOWARD JUSTICE: IDENTITY-CHALLENGING EDUCATION

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My involvement in education toward justice has taken place in three primary contexts in the United States: graduate-level theological education, largely White middle- to upper-class Protestant churches, and grant-funded residential programs of theological education for adolescents. Because these contexts tend to include people whose social locations involve privilege and social entitlement, education toward justice is almost always identity-challenging in some way. To teach about justice often involves contradicting the normative social narratives in which people have come to understand themselves, their families, their churches, and their nation. The identity-challenging nature of education toward justice can make learning painful. Understandably, such teaching can generate as much resistance as learning. Given this possibility, those who teach toward justice must pay attention to the real affective and social costs of justice and peace education for students of relative privilege.

As an example, in my current institution's required history course for the Master of Divinity degree, "Christianity in the Modern World: Colonialism and Christianities in the Americas, Asia, and Africa," students explore the complicity of the church in colonial projects that generated much suffering for persons not of European descent. Many discover that they cannot afford to learn what the course sets out to teach them. The course challenges their deeply held theological assumptions that the church is a vehicle of God's grace in the world. Students who have made economic and familial sacrifices to attend seminary to learn how to be leaders of this institution find their identities and commitments fundamentally questioned by the material. The pedagogical hope of challenging these internal narratives is that students gain a more critical understanding of this history, recognize its ongoing influence on present-day situations of injustice, and gain insight to lead a church that does not replicate a colonizing mission. However, the risk in teaching such histories is that the painful challenge to identity will cause defensiveness and hostility rather than an increased capacity for justice-seeking leadership.

Other teachers have recognized the “pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches,” as bell hooks once put it (1994, 43). hooks explains the need to recognize that pain in the classroom and to help students to name it in the midst of their learning. Sociologist Becky Thompson has begun to speak to the importance of a “pedagogy of tenderness” with accountability in such situations. Thompson advocates the use of contemplative practice in the classroom to allow students to process the grief and terror that learning such histories can generate, whether the histories of American Indian genocide or the history of environmental degradation (Thompson 2009, author notes). Elsewhere I have written about an ecology of approaches in teaching justice and peace that balances moments of stressing accountability to harsh realities and difficult histories and moments of attending with compassion to nurturing emergent justice commitments in the face of dominant narratives that contradict them (Turpin 2008, 151–152). The urgency of many of these social injustices sometimes makes us forget the need for patience and deep listening that such educational work requires.

Why is it that education toward justice, a beautiful ideal of human life deeply rooted in religious understandings, can cause so much pain for so many students? The causes of pain are complex. When dominant narratives of privilege are challenged, students often have a difficult time hearing this as a description of social histories and systems of domination rather than a challenge to their individual identity and morality (Johnson 2006, 77–78). For adult students, a critique of the life commitments and structures that one has already lived into can feel debilitating and demoralizing. Learning about gender justice, for example, can call into question the life decisions of women who grew up in an era with different understandings of the roles of women. Students fear a loss of relationship with family members and home communities that do not share their new understandings of the world. Students fear the conflict that can erupt in the learning community when the social agreement to ignore painful histories is broken. Students fear they will be emotionally overwhelmed by what they are learning and never emerge from the depressing morass of recognizing injustice and social conflict all around them. Students fear the loss of privilege and social status that a more just world might require. All of these are reasonable sources of pain that those who wish to teach toward justice cannot ignore. However, as Allan Johnson notes, it is possible to teach about such issues “in ways that make the struggle and the pain worth it” (Johnson 2006, 10).

A critical element of alleviating resistance and creating space to sustain learning toward justice is the support of the learning community. Stephen Brookfield articulated the “importance of belonging to an emotionally sustaining peer learning community—a group of colleagues who were also experiencing dissonance, reinterpreting their practice, challenging old assumptions and falling foul of conservative forces” (Brookfield 2000, 99). Brookfield advocates the peer learning community in response to the fear of estrangement from family and community of origin that critical thinking can generate, a potential reality he names “cultural suicide.” A former student, Grant Gieseke, gifted me with a powerful metaphor for this need for community. When he told the story of his own experience in learning about justice issues in his Master’s program, he used the image of “belaying” in mountain climbing. At times, education that challenges the cultural and familial narratives that one depends on for identity feels like jumping backward off a cliff in rappelling. As Gieseke noted, that jump is only possible if you trust that someone is holding the line that will catch you. In identity-challenging forms of justice education, friendship with others who hold the new understandings and commitments are critical. The learning community holds the belaying rope that allows the jump into the void that is learning a new way of understanding the world. The social grief, anger, and lament that occur in the in the process of learning require communal celebration, joy, and sustenance for balance. I find that students who are most involved in work for peace and justice are often the ones that find ways to play hard, worship, and laugh together as well.

In addition to the immediate learning community, students’ knowledge that they are joining a historical community of resistance can also help them feel less alone in the face of their learning. An important part of learning toward justice is recognizing the depth and repetition of the historical trajectories that lead to present injustices. In order to alleviate student despair in the face of the weight of this history, it becomes important to teach them the histories of peoples’ resistance to such structures as well. When we strive for justice, our contemporary work rests on the shoulders of giants, in Christian language the “communion of saints,” that have gone before us. Knowledge of this broader community can also provide a sense of social confirmation in the face of dominant narratives that contradict the learning toward justice.

Finally, education toward justice requires persons of privilege to divorce our capacity for agency from our sense of moral purity. One of

the primary dominant culture understandings of power links a sense of righteousness with the effective power to act. We become willing to dominate others because we think we are right in some ultimate sense. The knowledge that our individual and common lives are thoroughly structured by unjust and violent social systems can be paralyzing to those formed by such dominant understandings, meaning the outcome of education toward justice may be an informed despair rather than an increased capacity for just action. Despite our at times fervent desire to opt out of them, there is no capacity for social change outside of these structures. As Judith Butler explains on the issue of gender justice: "If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before,' 'outside,' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postponed the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself" (Butler 1999, 40). Working within the systems and structures that shape our identity requires compromise and recognition that movement toward justice can occur without working from a place of purity or a secure sense that our actions will be ultimately effective. The question that ethicist Sharon Welch has wrestled with for much of her career continues to inform my own thinking: "How, then, do we work, with power and passion, for social justice without the assurances of eventual victory and without the ego- and group-building dynamics of self-righteousness and demonizing?" (Welch 1999, xii). As a Christian theologian, this might involve an adequate notion of theological anthropology that balances recognition of our limits (we are steeped in original or structural sin) with our sense of being created in the image of God.

The costly nature of education toward justice for students in contexts of relative privilege has led me to a sense of profound humility for what can be accomplished in these contexts. The recalcitrance of social narratives of domination and privilege, their deep intractability in the construction of our identities, makes educational efforts toward justice in the settings I work within difficult at best. Opportunities for immersion and experiential education and actual coalitions with persons across the boundaries of social privilege are likely required to enable real learning and transformation. However, even in settings of privilege, pedagogical attention to the affective costs of learning toward justice can create environments where students can sometimes afford to learn those things that fundamentally challenge their own identities, families, and nations.

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