

“The Passion of the Counselor: Walking the Talk for Social Justice”

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Thank you, Judi. It is a great privilege and honor for me to be the keynote for this ACES Conference. I am extremely pleased that the theme of the conference is *SOCIAL JUSTICE*.

It is gratifying to see that those of us who provide leadership to the counseling profession, in so many ways, are focusing an entire conference on this important, but often misunderstood concept. The theme of my message today is Getting Beyond “Talking the Talk” to “*Walking the Talk*” when we train students and supervise counselors in issues of *access* and *equity*.

I would like to dedicate this keynote to the memory of three people. The first is *Reese House* (who passed away last month). Long before the term “social justice” became fashionable in the counseling profession, Reese was out in the trenches fighting for the rights of those who were marginalized or oppressed.

For Reese, social justice was not just an abstract concept; it was a way of life. Reese was a true warrior and he is missed, both at this conference and out on the frontlines. Most of what you will hear about social justice at this conference that sounds new is really not --- Reese House probably articulated it 25 years ago. We are here today because Reese led the way.

The second person that I would like to dedicate my remarks to this

afternoon is *Asa Hilliard* (who left us this summer). The Fuller E. Callaway Professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University, Asa's original work on Afrocentricity has been an inspiration to three generations of African American scholars in a number of social science disciplines (including counseling). His pioneering work on African American empowerment now transcends race and is a foundational pillar of all that we know about social justice. We are here today also because of Asa Hilliard.

The third person that I would like to dedicate these remarks to, most of you have never heard of. He is a young man by the name of *Deamonte Driver* and his story truly moved me:

Deamonte Driver was a 12 year old student in the Prince George's County, Maryland public school system. One day he got a toothache. Deamonte's mother, who was a wage-reliant worker, had no health insurance and the family's Medicaid coverage had temporarily lapsed. Because of this, she could not afford to pay the \$86.00 dentist bill. By the time Deamonte was seen by a dentist the bacteria from the abscess in his rotting tooth had spread to his brain. After two operations and 6 weeks of hospital care, Deamonte died on February 25 of this year. It was later discovered that Deamonte and his younger brother, DaShawn, never received dental attention at any time during their young lives.

The significant point about this story is that this did not happen in Darfur (or any other "developing" country in Africa), it happened in one of the most

affluent regions in the wealthiest country in human history! I am here at this conference to bear witness to Deamonte's story and ensure that we as counselor educators and supervisors devote our efforts to preparing a generation of professional counselors (*who like Reese and Asa*) will commit themselves to crafting a society where our children do not die because they cannot afford an \$86 dental visit.

We have much work to do. To paraphrase Jonathon Kozol, we live in a *world of savage inequalities!* Every morning as I sip my coffee and read the *Washington Post* I am left to wonder:

- Why is it that one school system can be a model of educational success and another a model of educational failure -- and they are only separated by a few miles?
- Why is it that in New Orleans, two years after Hurricane Katrina, the French Quarter has almost returned to its Mardi Gras normalcy, while the Ninth Ward still looks like a devastated ghost town?
- Why if this is country prides itself on being a land of immigrants, are politicians (whose ancestors came from somewhere else) talking about building a 2000 mile-long wall to keep people out?
- Why scores of our brightest and best young people who are willing to serve with distinction in a highly questionable war come home and can't find jobs, are deprived of benefits, or receive shoddy health care?
- Why couples in life-long, committed loving relationships, who happen to

- be of the same sex, can't receive marriage benefits?
- Why young women with names like Paris, and Brittany, and Lindsey get ludicrous jail sentences, ranging from 90 minutes to 3 weeks, while those without fame or fortune are forced to sit in jail for extended periods of time with minimal legal assistance at the mercy of the justice system?
 - Why the oldest of our citizens on fixed incomes often have to choose between food and medicine?
 - How a city can justify spending \$611 million dollars to build a baseball stadium, while the students in its public schools have to share textbooks because there are not enough for every student?
 - Why a hangman's noose, an archaic symbol of racial intolerance and legal discrimination, has reappeared in Jena, Louisiana, the campus of the University of Maryland, and on one of our colleague's door at TC at Columbia U.?

Every day it becomes increasingly more evident to me that we live in a world of savage inequalities. *A world built on inequities of power and privilege!*

This leads me to the **meaning** in what we do as counselor educators and supervisors. I am an Existentialist (*I view my life as an on-going journey that is a search for meaning*). As the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus would contend in a post-modern world, ***“Life has no meaning save what we give to it”***

So let's talk about life meaning: Why do you get up in the morning to do what you do? Why do you get up in the morning to teach or supervise? Why do you do what you do?

Let me share four words that might help give you some context in answering these questions, they form the acronym P-A-C-E. *PASSION-ADVOCACY-COMMITMENT-EMPOWERMENT*. As you answer those questions for yourselves, keep those four words in mind. And as you answer those questions for yourselves, think about how important they are in preparing professional counselors to work in a world of savage inequalities.

Yes, it is crucial that we prepare counselors with the skills to help students/clients effectively solve problems and make decisions (*the essence of counseling*). Counseling is about effective educational and mental health intervention at an individual level. But if we help people to become "well" and would put them back into "sick" environments (be they "sick" families, "sick" schools, "sick" communities, or "sick" countries) we know they will get "sick" again.

And when I talk about *sick environments*, I am talking about those environments where there is a lack of access and inequity, particularly for those who have been systematically excluded on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental disability, education, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of background or group membership.

As counselors, therefore, truly promoting *wellness* and *optimal human development* is about a commitment to *social justice*, based on a belief that all people have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights and a fair allocation of societal resources. (*Which is the essence of social justice – Social Justice means there are no savage inequalities!!!!*)

And it is not either/or. I grow weary of the frivolous debates we get into about the nature of counseling being either individually-focused or systemically focused. *It must be both!* I believe that as professional counselors we have an *ethical and moral responsibility* to help our clients to become empowered *and* also to use our awareness, knowledge and skill to work with and for those we serve to make the world a more equitable place.

If this is the case, then we better think about who we are admitting to our profession – *since we are the gatekeepers of the profession!!* I'll tell you what I want in a student. In addition to all those good counseling qualities, I want a kid with *courage!* A student for me must have the courage of his or her convictions and be willing to stand up and articulate social injustices to agents of power who are often unable or unwilling to hear about them. Courage also entails being willing to go beyond the safety of one's theoretical orientation or professional socialization.

I also want kids with leadership skills! I don't want those students who merely sit quietly in class, do all the assignments and passively get their 4.0 averages! I want kids who are passionate about changing the world (*sometimes there is naïveté with that passion, but I'll take it!*)

- I want those kids who will have the guts to go into schools and do all that good stuff that the Ed Trust advocates for closing the Achievement Gap **(which is the great shame of American education!)** like Angel Wagner a 2006 school counseling graduate from the University of Maryland who is a counselor at Oscar de la Hoya Amino Charter School in Los Angeles. This school is overwhelmingly poor and Latino. It has not had much of a college-going culture. Angel had every senior fill out a college application last academic year and got a 70% college acceptance rate!
- I want those kids who have the guts to engage self-righteous, sanctimonious and hypocritical politicians about Gay and Lesbian issues and advocate for human rights for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation – like Colleen Logan, the President-Elect of ACA (who came to us as doctoral student at the University of Virginia with passionate energy focused on attacking homophobia and taught us all new lessons about tolerance and diversity)

Once we get individuals like these under our tutelage we make sure *that social justice is the foundation of their training*. We make the concepts of *access* and *equity* the cornerstone of every one of their courses and field experiences. These concepts are not just for the multicultural course or for your newly approved *Social Justice in Counseling* course!

While they are reading Rogers, Ellis, Perls, and Sue & Sue, our students also need to be reading the thoughts of John Rawls (*the philosopher who gave us the term **Social Justice***), Paolo Friere, Frantz Fanon, and Jonathon Kozol.

Our development of the next generation of counselors must include a call to action. This counselor call to action begins at the personal level with self-exploration. We must help our students/supervisees understand that counseling for social justice is more than a professional obligation; it is about living one's life in a manner that is dedicated to promoting access and equity.

Here are some specific steps for self-exploration to help our students/supervisees see that counseling for social justice must be about not only "talking the talk," but "walking the talk" as well.

1. Explore Life Meaning and Commitment

Begin by having your students/supervisees ask those existential questions: *What do I do and why do I do it? How do I do it? Who do I do it for? What do I believe about my students/clients? What do I believe about myself? What are the results of my efforts? Am I committed to fostering and supporting a society that is more enlightened, just and humane through my life and work? (Or am I merely concerned with getting my LPC?)*

2. Explore Personal Privilege

Have students/supervisees explore the nature of their personal cultural privilege. Have them evaluate the unearned privilege they enjoy in society by virtue of their skin color, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other demographic or cultural characteristic. With all due respect to Peggy McIntosh –

it is more than just “White Privilege!!!!” For example, students of color must be asked, Are you straight?, able-bodied?, Christian?, middle class,? then you too have privilege.

This exploration must begin with a personal acknowledgement of such privilege and the how it contributes to societal inequities. Have students challenge themselves to find ways to exploit their cultural privilege in any venue that will promote equity, human rights, and a fair allocation of societal resources.

3. Explore the Nature of Oppression

Counseling for social justice must be based on an understanding of the nature of oppression. It is important for students/supervisees to consider the impact of oppression on their life and work. Ask: *How have I been a victim of oppression? How have I contributed to the perpetuation of oppression? Have I used personal or professional authority or power in unjust ways?*

4. Work to Become Multiculturally Literate

Have students/supervisees become committed to living cultural diversity as a reality rather than experiencing it as an abstraction. Encourage them to embrace a lifestyle that will help them to become *multiculturally literate*. To be multiculturally literate is to possess basic information needed to negotiate the diverse interconnected global society of the 21st century. *Multicultural literacy goes beyond mere competency* to embracing a way of life that encourages maximum exposure to and understanding of the many-faceted realities of multiculturalism. *(Multicultural literacy is about more than getting an A in the multicultural counseling course!!!)*

5. Establish a Personal Social Justice Compass

Help students/supervisees develop a set of personal principles and ideals to direct their commitment to social justice. These principles and ideals should provide a moral compass to guide both their life and work.

I would suggest four important documents that may influence your thinking about such a compass. The first of these documents is the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted by the United Nations in 1948. This historic and landmark document establishes a set of universal principles that were conceived as the foundation of global freedom, justice and peace. Any counselor committed to social justice should be familiar with this document and its enlightened ideas about the possibility of a better world.

The second major document is the *2005 ACA Code of Ethics*. All counseling should be predicated on ethical practice. A social justice perspective on counseling, in particular, rests on understanding and adhering to those recently added sections of the code which state that counselors have an ethical responsibility to engage in advocacy initiatives, both with and on behalf of their clients that challenge systemic barriers to psychosocial development.

The Advocacy Competencies developed by Judy Lewis, Mary Arnold, Reese House and Rebecca Toporek represent the third significant document to consider in establishing a personal compass. From the student/client level to the public arena, these competencies prescribe best practice in advancing advocacy on behalf of those individuals with whom counselors work.

The fourth of these suggested documents is the *Multicultural Counseling Competencies* originally developed by Derald Wing Sue, Patricia Arredondo and Rod McDavis.

Taken together these documents embody the essence of social justice ideals and principles. While none of them is perfect, they all provide both the ethical and philosophical framework for developing a personal perspective to advance social justice in one's work as a professional counselor.

So what meaning is there in my words when we speak of social justice – here is the meaning for me as a professional counselor. And it goes back to P-A-C-E. We must be *passionate* about challenging the savage inequalities that confront so many members of the human family. We must help our students/supervisees channel their *passion* into counseling awareness, knowledge and skills that will help address social inequities.

We must be *advocates* to work with and for the marginalized and powerless in eliminating barriers to access and equity. We must help our students understand that while *advocacy* for the profession is important, advocacy for social change is a far higher calling.

Promoting social justice is not just a professional *commitment*. It is a *life-long personal commitment* to challenging abuses of power and privilege wherever and however they are experienced in one's own life and the lives of others.

Our ultimate goal is self and client *empowerment*. We must help our students see how power operates in people's lives and help them develop the skills to help clients/students develop the personal skill to use power to change their own lives and the lives of those around them

I hope you leave this conference with new sense of meaning and feeling empowered to truly make a difference in the lives of the students/supervisees that you work with. It is my expectation that you will not only talk the talk, *but walk the talk*- that you will become even more passionate, empowered and committed to your work as an advocate for justice in a world of savage inequalities.

That's my keynote address. If I have inspired you this afternoon, then Reese and Asa would be proud. If I have angered you, then I definitely know that they are looking down and smiling. And if you are angered, as a counselor in a world full of savage inequalities, you better ask yourself why? Because working for social justice is not about being warm and fuzzy. It is about putting on the armor of righteousness and getting down and dirty in an epic battle with the inequities of power and privilege.

When I think about the challenges we face in fighting for social justice, I am reminded of the epic words of King Leonidas of Sparta when he led the 300 against the mighty legions of Persia at the battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C. - "*Enjoy your breakfast, for tonight we dine in hell*"

But I am willing to accept these challenges and teach the next generation of counselors how to fight for social justice whenever I think of

Deamonte Driver. Deamonte's death is a call to action for all counselors.

Access to quality dental care should be a right for every child, regardless of his or her socioeconomic status in the richest and most powerful nation in human history.

Are you willing to accept the call to action?

I close with a quote from the great Brazilian educator and social justice philosopher Paulo Freire, which I feel is the essence of counselor education/supervision and social justice. I hope it will provide context for this conference:

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

Thank you and Good Luck!