

If Not Us, Then Who? Let Us Rise:
Conversations that Create Change

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This article is for us: the ones who work day in and day out tirelessly trying to instill best practices of social justice into our own and other's daily actions. I am not talking about them, you know who I mean, those folks that seem to never get it or undermine our well intentioned efforts. We sit in our meetings talking about them all the time. They did not show up... again. They would never come to this type of program. They will never get it. Let us assume we are right for once. Let us have a conversation with those of us that do seem invested in making or creating change on our campuses. Let us change the conversations at our meetings, programs, and unofficial gatherings so that we can continue the work we are trying to do. By focusing on the folks that are engaged in social justice work we will attract those with interest instead of trying to change the minds of those that are not eager to have these conversations.

After working in higher education for ten years - five of those years traveling campus-to-campus as a social justice educator - I have uncovered the patterns of my own excuses and realize that I am in good company. Sure, the vocabulary might have shifted from pluralism to multiculturalism to tolerance, then acceptance followed quickly by celebration, diversity and now social justice – but the work has not changed nor have the excuses. I challenge myself as well as the other social justice champions to sit down for a reality check and start having desperately needed honest conversations with one another.

I have found, honest dialog made from authentic listening and vulnerable live experiences seems to still be a struggle for many. Working specifically with what I would call self-identified, white, well intentioned, liberal, social justice advocates, one of the hardest pieces to understand is that there is as much work to be done now as there was prior to the 1960s. Reviewing historical social movements, I hypothesize, that for many dominant group members, meaning individuals that inherited perceived and/or actualized identities that come with a sense of power over other socially constructed groups, it seems that the need for such authenticity began to evaporate during the 1960s often referred to as the Civil Rights Movement. After reading Paul Loeb's [Soul of a Citizen](#), I realized those of us, me included, that were born after the 1960s seem to think that a lot of social issues were solved by these great leaders that we hold up and exceptional human beings that changed the world. This is dangerous for many reasons.

1) Dominant group members assume their lived experiences to be true for everyone without creating a space of empathy for different experiences of marginalized or subordinate group members. Moreover, we privileged folks like things to be simple and examining the intersections of multiple identities whether dominant or subordinated is too messy to easily comprehend. At best, the well intentioned social justice advocate may, almost buffet style, pick and choose lived experiences from a single serving of identity and plate them up without overlap, connection, or mixing with other stories. I heard well intentioned social justice advocates with many dominant identities state the following examples. *I can't believe he said that – I mean you would think that since he uses a wheelchair that he wouldn't tell such a sexist joke. Or I got laid off too, but I worked really hard and found a job after six weeks. Maybe you aren't trying hard enough? – I totally understand how bad the job market is right now.*

2) Those of us that were not active in the 1960s can both assume the experts from history solved all of those problems while also distancing themselves (myself too) from these exceptional unique individuals so that we can displace our own responsibility to stay in the work. We want this both ways, heroes from the past solved all of the social ills and when faced with current social injustices we sit back and longingly await the arrival of the next hero. Drawing from [Soul of a Citizen](#) again, we view ourselves as inadequate if not absolved of any responsibility because we do not view ourselves as exceptional enough to make a difference. *I'm no Gandhi. Or Come on, you really think that person meant anything by that comment to you? Aren't you being a little sensitive – I mean it is 2011 already!*

3) Lastly, I notice a reoccurring pattern on campuses where our current conversations about social injustices originate from our places of marginalization instead of from our inherited power identities. Marginalized groups are subordinated by these socially constructed dominant power groups and therefore gather to build community support with one another while also reinforcing a story of the have nots and the haves. Rarely, if ever, do conversations in these marginalized gatherings consist of the dominant identities in the room. When I am on a campus, it is in a facilitated dialog with the Black Student Union, that I encourage a conversation about race and the present dominant identities like being black and straight, or having perceived Christian privilege, able bodied, access to education, upper class, US citizens. As advisors, to the LGBT Student Group, Women's Coalition, Christian Gathering, that I encourage us all to utilize these support groups to then foster authentic dialog around the dominant identities that also exist in the membership. Power and privilege may be inherited or perceived by others and it is important for those gathering around marginalized identities also discuss the complexity and intersections of dominant identities in the room. Having privilege conversations in marginalized spaces brings

light to the varying levels of responsibility between the “us” (those present) and the “them” (those uninvited) not in attendance. I have found facilitating these conversations easier than I originally thought possible and the gatherings themselves provide a sense of safe space needed to have an authentic conversation. Participants have commented that gathering around a marginalized identity is fantastic for community building and feeling supported on campus, it can also maintain and foster a simplistic view of privilege absolving anyone in one marginalized group from having any intersectional experiences with power. This creates a system where my subordinated lived experience trumps any responsibility one might have regarding dominant identities. *I am a lesbian, therefore I do not need to acknowledge white privilege. Or I am from a lower economic class – it is tough for me and my wife to buy Christmas presents. Being a Christian doesn't bring me any privilege.*

Let us change the conversations that we are actually having in our support groups and our communities. We first need to refocus our energies to the people that are interested in the work instead of beating our heads against the wall because some people just are not interested. The truth is some are not and the ones that are – they are waiting to get to work while we complain about not having folks that want to work. This might be a reason that we often think we are inadequate to create change because those around us do not validate our interest and commitment. Next, we need to realize that social justice work is based on simple concepts that are difficult and complicated to implement. We may never finish; we may never win. This isn't why we are doing the work in the first place – we do this because it is the right thing to do. Creating change, actively listening, being vulnerable, and developing authentic understanding of another's lived experience are both exhilarating and exhausting. It is up to us to do our own self-reflection and relationship building. It is up to us (individually and collectively) to stay in the

work and reclaim our responsibility. After all, as the Hopi Prophecy states, we are the one's we are waiting for. If not us, Then Who?

To continue the conversation, contact Jessica Pettitt at jess@iamsocialjustice.com

To keep your skills sharp – here are some suggested readings:

Soul of a Citizen by Paul Loeb

Promoting diversity and social justice by D. J. Goodman

Readings for Diversity and Social Justice

Microaggressions in Everyday Life by Derald Sue

Covering: The hidden assault on our civil rights by Kenji Yoshino

Uprooting Racism: How white people can work for racial justice by Paul Kivel

Identity development of diversity populations by Vasti Torres, Mary F. Howard-Hamilton, Diane L. Cooper

Hardiman, R., & Jackson, B. (1994). Oppression: Conceptual & developmental analysis. In M. Adams, P. Brigham, P. Dalpes & L. Marchesani (Eds.), Diversity and oppression: Conceptual frameworks (pp. 1-11). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Pharr, S. (1994). Common Elements of oppressions. In M. Adams, P. Brigham, P. Daples & L. Marchesani (Eds.), Diversity and oppression: Conceptual frameworks (pp. 7-11). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.