



The Power of Songs and Social Justice

BY DR. DAVID WHITFIELD

I believe now is the time to create a world of social justice for women and girls, the children, the working poor, the houseless, the voiceless, the abused, and the different. Why is social justice important to me? Because I believe in meeting the challenges of extending liberty, equity, freedom, and justice for all. If we do not, everyone suffers, because as Martin Luther King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

If we want families, communities, countries, and a world that is committed to social justice for all, we must change our worldview, our thinking, and take different actions toward these issues. Social justice tells us to share advantages and disadvantages, benefits and burdens, equitably. And that includes shortages.

David Hume, the Scottish economist and philosopher said: "Since the subject matter of justice is the distribution of things that are in short supply, it follows that if nothing were in short supply ...the concept of justice would have no application."

To address the shortages, my world vision is: Basics without borders—meaning, food, shelter, clean drinking water, clothes, education, and medical.

Social justice is about fostering social existence, providing a space for everyone at the table; it is about life and dignity of the human person. It can be defined as the way in which human rights are manifested every day, for every person, at every level of society.

What about Women and Girls?

"We're coming to the edge, running on the water, coming through the fog, your sons and daughters." To me these lyrics speak to the misogynist, the hater of women.

Why do I say that? There are 100 million women and girls missing around the world because of gender discrimination, or because of misogyny. When I hear the song about Estonia, with the words, "Land of my fathers, land that I love, I've given my heart to her." Women and girls are giving their hearts and souls to the world. How do we reconcile these facts?

Women, according to the United Nations, do 66% of the world's work; women produce 50% of the world's food; and earn a whopping 10% of the world's income; yet they possess a measly 1% of the world's property? What about that works for us? And that's the second reason why social justice is important to me.

How do we reconcile the compendium of atrocities against women and girls: sex trafficking, sex slavery, political rape, domestic rape (that every 6 minutes in this country a woman is raped). Then there's maternal mortality: a woman dies every minute, trying to give birth to a child. Where is the social justice in all of this?

Some 800,000 people are illegally trafficked across international borders each year; 80% are women—that's 640,000 women per year, taken against their will; thousands of these women are in the U. S., as sex slaves, sweatshop workers, and many are working for nothing. That too, is not social justice. We know this, mind you. As the Chinese proverb says, "To know and not to act is not to know."

You will hear words from the song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd," code words and instructions for plantation slaves to escape to freedom. So, how would a 21st Century drinking gourd look for women and girls?

From this song, you will hear, the "old man is waiting to carry you to freedom." Who is "the old man" waiting to carry the women and girls to freedom? We have met the old man, and he is us—it is up to us to change this, if not we're complicit.

I am sure many of you have heard Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind," a song he wrote in 10 minutes, a song based on an old black spiritual titled, "No more Auction Block for me." Though his song talks about men, I want to paraphrase it: instead of "How many roads must a man walk down before you can call him a man?" I want to say, "How much more work must women do? How much more abuse must they take before they can be treated as equals, as persons?"

We're talking about half the world's population here.

What about the Children?

Approximately 25,000 children die daily around the world, primarily from a lack of clean drinking water; lack of food, from malaria for the lack of a \$10-mosquito net; and measles because they cannot get a \$1-injection. And thousands go to bed hungry each night in this country.

"Teach Your Children" is a song from Crosby Stills, Nash, and Young. Are we teaching our children well? So, children are the third reason social justice is important to me. I was one of the children who was not taught well. I walked off the plantation, from



home, from my 10 other siblings, and my parents, at the ripe age of 13, illiterate, delivering a newspaper to sharecroppers. Most could not read it; and nor could I.

It was one of the largest cotton plantations in the Mississippi Delta, and I did not know where I was headed—where I ended up is a different story. But as I walked along the gravel road, a cattle truck driver gave me a ride, and since I had to sit in the back of truck where every type of animal dropping imaginable: cows, hogs, and chickens—it had that smell. And at least he gave me a ride out of there, all the way to Plainview, Minnesota.

While on the plantation, I learned two major lessons: one at the age of 8; the other at the age of 10.

The first lesson was from brutality which social justice opposes; the second was from compassion which social justice embraces.

When winter comes, the cotton plantation is desolate and there's little or no work for the sharecropper, little or no food, especially if the sharecroppers did not save—and most did not because there was virtually nothing to save.

Early November that year, word spread across the plantation that a commodity truck had arrived—some called it a rations truck—with items such as dried beans, corn meal, flour, cheese, etc., rations from the government, we were told.

So, my mother who was pregnant took me with her to the commodity truck. She was third in line. Then the row-walker arrived—a supervisor of sharecroppers—he was a big burly gentleman, dressed in overalls, with a huge wad of tobacco in his jaw, spitting all over the place. As the driver opened the double doors, the women shuffled closer to the truck, lining up for their rations. And the row-walker, like a rattle snake, became enraged, I mean suddenly; and he yelled, in a very nasty tone of voice, “You niggers move back!”

Since they didn't move back fast enough, he rushed to the front of the line and pushed the first woman, who fell into the second, both fell onto my mother who fell to the ground, moaning, holding her stomach—again, pregnant. Before she could get up, he spat tobacco juice at her; luckily she moved her head in time.

That was the lesson of brutality: namely, how poorly and violently we treat one another.

My second lesson is one of compassion—of all the things that happened to me during that time, this one tops the list.

Imagine, the latter part of November, 1950, and all the cotton had

been picked, processed, and on the market, there was little or no work for sharecroppers; again, food was either very little or none at all. In our situation, there was no food in the house, for 10 siblings. So, our dad found some corn.

And early the next morning about sunrise, my brother Frank and I took the corn to a white farmer's house to grind it for cornbread. The farmer and his wife had a small farm with the little red barn and all, located off the plantation.

It had been 3 days since we'd had food in the house. So, when we got to the farmer's house, we knocked on the back door—Mississippi protocol; it was forbidden for us to go to the front of the house where whites lived. The farmer's wife came to the door and asked us what we wanted.

We said we came to grind some corn, as we stood there staring at the ground, because it was also forbidden for us to look her in the face—that was Mississippi law. She stood there, not saying a word, seemingly forever. Finally, in her Mississippi drawl, she said we looked like we were hungry. And she was right. Not only were we hungry, we were starving—after all, 3 days is a long time without eating.

She invited us into her kitchen which was very, very risky—mind you, this was 1950 Mississippi, “the meanest state in the union,” as Martin Luther King would have it until he got to Chicago. The farmer's wife fried eggs and bacon, potatoes and onions, flapjacks (pancakes), gave us a glass of fresh country milk. We had never had such a breakfast, never.

I can still smell the potatoes and onions; I can never forget the red-white checkered table cloth. And she kept saying, for us to hurry up because her husband was out hunting and if he came back and saw us in their kitchen, that he would be very mad. We understood that. We ate, ground the corn, and headed back to the plantation.

Why does that event stick in my mind?

Because she risked her marriage by feeding us; more importantly, she risked her life for allowing two black children to eat at her kitchen table; that was strictly forbidden by Mississippi state law. We too, were at risk; because we could have been visited around midnight, by those who wore the white robe.

The farmer's wife fractured everything I had been taught about the world in general and white people in particular, and it completely changed my worldview.

And as the lyrics you will hear tonight remind us, that ... “we have



come so far, we have seen so much, but there is much more to do.”

What do we do about those who lose their house every seven 7.5 seconds; meaning a family or a person becomes houseless, houseless every 7.5 seconds in these United States.

How is that for distributive justice, or social justice? I often think of the Platinum Rule. The platinum rule says treat people the way they want to be treated—not the golden rule, that says treat people the way you want to be treated. Social justice is about treating each person in a manner appropriate for that person.

“If our children should live to see the next century—what progress will we have made?” And I ask, what progress will we have made regarding the creation of possibilities, distribution of opportunities, of the basics: food, shelter, clothing, clean drinking water, education, and medical.

Because social justice tells us that one’s gain or advantage must not be a loss or a disadvantage to another.

How is that working today? Not very well, because 1% of the population has 95% of the wealth, leaving 99% of the population to wrangle over the 5% crumbs. Michael Moore puts it best, by saying: “it’s similar to one person taking 9 slices from a 10-slice pie, and leaving only one slice for the rest to squabble over.” We must change that because if we don’t, in my view, this republic won’t survive.

We have created a culture of greed, which leads me to the “Working Poor.”

What about the Working Poor?

Those who subsidize the corporations, where distribution is inadequate; greed is rampant (with few exceptions), where workers experience severe shortages in pay and benefits.

I teach a class at Gonzaga titled, “Leadership & Economics,” and last semester we randomly selected two American corporations from a list, to look at Chief Executive Officers’ hourly pay. The first one collects \$9,888, plus pennies per hour—per hour, mind you. So, at the end of an 8-hour day, he collects, not earns, approximately \$80,000, per day!! And, he has medical, clothes, shelter, clean drinking water, and then some. The working poor, those who clean the offices, bathrooms, etc., of this corporation, make between \$6 and \$10 per hour; the average hourly pay in this corporation is \$10.83 per hour, without medical, dental, etc.

Where is the economic justice here? Where is the social justice?

Well, Mr. Chief Executive Officer, as the words from another song, “In my fantasy, I see a world of justice, where all people live in peace and honesty.” And I ask you, Mr. Chief Executive Officer, are you, living in peace and honesty, collecting \$80,000 per day, and those who clean your floors, bathrooms, make a measly, miserable (maybe) \$10.83 per hour?

What about a real jaw-dropper? The insurance corporation CEO who collects—now hear this—\$102,000 per hour, that’s more than \$4 million per week. I wonder if he has the basics. Can we truly create a real nation of one for the sake of, the voiceless, the houseless, the hungry, and the different?

We need to create justice-centered environments, communities, work worlds, where rewards are based on the value people contribute: to the family, the community, the corporation, the world, a world where all are recognized, validated, respected, rewarded, first as individuals, as workers, and owners, a world where advantages and disadvantages, benefits and burdens are shared equitably, even if it means bringing back the draft.

At times, I think we’re asleep, in death’s waiting room, having nightmares, and trying to wake up. Once we’re awake, it may be too late.

As Martin Luther King said, “Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s Theory of Relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermo-dynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

I encourage you to explore what is generated inside of you. Where are the goose bumps, the deep breaths, where are you moved? And how will you respond?

And finally, A Humanitarian Manifesto

“You and I, we meet as strangers..., each carrying a mystery within us. I cannot say who you are. I may never know you completely. But I trust that you are a person in your own right, possessed of a beauty and value that are the Earth’s richest treasures. I impose no identities upon you, but will invite you to become yourself without shame or fear. I will hold open a space for you in the world and allow your right to fill it with an authentic vocation and purpose. For as long as your search takes, you have my loyalty.”
~Anonymous

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This speech was given by Dr. David Whitfield© to the of Master Works Fall Concert on "Let Freedom Ring: Songs of Social Justice," October 10 2009.

Born in Coahoma County, Mississippi on one of the largest cotton plantation in the Delta, David Whitfield walked off the plantation at age 13, illiterate, with a nickel, a dime and a penny in his pockets. He ended up on a labor camp in Plainview, Minnesota; landed on the South Side of Chicago; taught himself how to read; worked his way through high school; served in Viet Nam 1968-1969; earned a B. S. and a Doctorate from the University of San Francisco; taught at Boston University for nine years; The University of Oklahoma for 4 years and is currently Professor of Doctoral Program in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University in Washington state.

