

Mission Statement (Speech version)

By Sadye Sagov

When the Brookline High School Program in Social Justice Leadership began, my definition of social justice was unclear. I knew that justice was related to fairness and morality, and that *social* justice would bring these qualities to issues that I cared about. I believed that a just society was one that afforded individuals fair treatment and a fair share of the benefits of society. I thought about the poles of justice: The hungry versus the fed, the uneducated versus the educated. I believed that closing the gaps between people was the goal, and seeing the issues as polar made them seem easier to solve. I still believe that closing, or at least minimizing, those gaps is the goal; however, now I see more layers. I also still believe that positive results are attainable, but I understand that the process is not so clean cut. As Marianne Williamson said: "If you are getting involved in trying to heal the world, you're not guaranteed specific results as you define them. You are not promised that because you are doing this, a particular organization will work or a particular cause prevail." I understand more of the gradations and links between the some of world's problems now and I know that the solutions will also need to be complex and multifaceted.

At the end of this course, I feel my definition of social justice is more solid. Each new issue I learned about changed the way I defined it as a whole. By adding new information I was able to tighten my definition of social justice. Learning, for example, about the different ways that people handled water rights in the film *Thirst* helped me to understand how many answers there can be to the same problem. In Bolivia Oscar Olivera led an insurrection against water privatization; in India a grassroots movement for water conservation developed and grew; and in the United States a coalition fought to have a say in the decisions about who owned their water. I learned that each of these methods had different strengths and weaknesses, and that the details of a problem often dictate the steps to a solution. In Bolivia making a blaring statement may have been the only way to have the people's voices be heard, whereas in the United States there was already a way in which the citizens could speak out in a less aggressive and more systemic manner.

Some of the issues that we discussed made me reassess my own social justice values. For instance, several topics that we covered in this course made me look at violence in a new light. I have never been, and still am not, one to turn to violence as a solution. At the beginning of this class it made me angry to hear about violent rebellions, and wars. I couldn't understand how hurting another human could solve any of the problems that we face. It seemed unthinkable to threaten, wound, or kill another person in the name of justice. But when we began to talk about people being denied clean water, and being excluded from other basic rights I started to see why people sometimes do take it to that level. I began to understand how powerless people must feel and why sometimes a striking statement needs to be shoved in power's face. However, if the opposing power is ignorance or apathy, violence is not the solution.

I believe that indifference is often the result of a lack of knowledge, or connection to an issue. People have the most understanding, and the highest stake in issues that lie close to home. My sophomore English teacher made a great visual point of this during a class exercise. The teacher asked who in the class would be willing to fight in a war for the good of the world. Maybe one person raised his hand. Then she narrowed the question: Who would be willing to fight for the United States? Massachusetts? Brookline? Each question summoned more hands to rise. Finally, the teacher asked who would be willing to fight in a war for their family. Nearly every hand was in the air.

I used to think that working for social justice meant helping people across the globe with problems that I would never face. I passed by many problems in my own city because I saw them as boring

or unimportant in comparison to those of the larger world. I was proven wrong when I began my internship and learned about the Boston public school system. Not only were my eyes opened to a huge problem that I was previously largely unaware of, but I also found that I sincerely cared about the issue at hand.

Throughout the year the fact that social justice is different from community service has become clearer to me. While they both come from the hope to help, their values and approaches are different. I realized that social justice is about more than fixing a problem. It is about trying to stop the problem from occurring. Paul Rogat Loeb once said that 'if community service was comparable to pulling an endless sequence of drowning children out of a river, social justice was comparable to figuring out why they were falling into the river in the first place *as well* as rescuing many from their peril. A social justice advocate knows that they will not be able to save every child. Instead they go upstream and mend the broken bridge or stop the people who are pushing the children in.'

Social justice work is effective when it links humanity and emphasizes the common threads that we share. Without social solidarity and compassion it is very difficult to challenge power relations, punish wrongdoers, or make change in another way. I feel that empathy is a huge facet in social change because you have to care to make a difference. Someone once said that: "Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless....It's an ethical essential" (Loeb). In order to make change, we need to understand why change needs to be made.

Now, at the end of this program I have a more evolved and polished definition of social justice. While it has not strayed far from my original idea that social justice related to equal opportunities, it has definitely filled out. I now believe that social justice does not simply aim to clean up existing, surface problems, but also tries to challenge and dismantle the very roots of oppression and inequity. In my mind, its goals are a fair distribution of wealth, resources, opportunities, *and* responsibilities (UC Berkley School of Social Welfare). Social justice should be empowering for all the people involved and should create social solidarity through awareness and education.

Social justice advocates need to understand how meshed the issues are. Gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and other classifications do not stand alone. Each connects to other categorizations, but it also sprouts new issues. I believe that because the issues are connected the solutions are also connected. By working on one issue we may really be acting to solve another.

I wish that social change could be incorporated more into people's daily lives. Aristotle once said that: "moral excellence comes about as a result of habit". The Dalai Lama once said that "human beings are social creatures" and that "a concern for each other is the very basis of our life together". When the thoughts of these two great thinkers combine one can see that since human nature is to care for each other it is already a habit. And if moral excellence can come about as a result of good habits, maybe it isn't so hard to attain.