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# PROMOTING BELIEF AND ACTION THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING: EMBRACING THE TEACHER AS ACTIVIST

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Serving as the guest editor for this Activism edition of Peace Chronicle is an honor, a distinct pleasure, and a catharsis. Although I have been teaching for a quarter century, my role and my self-assessment of my responsibility as an educator have evolved. Preparing this issue has provided the opportunity to reflect on those who have served as mentors and inspirations in my evolution – Betty Reardon, David Gilbert, Jalil Muntaqim, Stephen Gordon, Leslie Pickering – and to celebrate the community of activism that I am fortunate to be a part of in Western New York.

The articles included within represent a variety of perspectives, topical areas, and efforts that have shaped our community and our collective identity. Niagara University, located less than five miles from the majestic Niagara Falls, will host the 2024 Peace and

Justice Studies Association annual conference, and the collection of articles in this issue will hopefully serve as an introduction to our region and many of the people who serve critical roles in promoting justice and peace within Western New York.

At the conference you will meet many of the authors and have the opportunity to learn more about their experiences, their advocacy, their research, and their work. I am certain that you will find their stories compelling and inspirational; as they have motivated and taught me how to be an activist and to embrace my responsibility as an educator and advocate.

It is only recently that I identify as an activist. In the past I resisted advocacy as a necessary part of teaching, and of my responsibility as an educator.

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In my teaching over a quarter century I started with a concentration in International Relations and political science, and have moved over time toward social movements and peace and justice studies with classes that include topics such as Organizing and Advocating for Justice. For me the common theme in my teaching is not the content or the subject matter, but rather the emphasis on developing critical thinking skills and encouraging students to become increasingly discerning in their consumption of information. I want and expect students to be disciplined in their thinking, to learn how to actively and skillfully conceptualize, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information that is gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, and communication.

This in turn should serve as a guide to belief and action – two distinct and important aspects of learning that we tend to treat very differently in higher education. Belief and action.

In my career I have given primacy in my teaching to belief at the expense of action. I have encouraged students to learn to think, but have only recently begun to encourage students to learn to act. And yet I recognize now that both are essential aspects of critical thinking. Critical thinking is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter: clarity, accuracy, precision,

consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.

But to understand good reasons, fairness, and how to draw sound conclusions also presupposes a responsibility to act. If we understand that the development of the intellect is for the purpose of guiding behavior, then teachers also have an obligation to cultivate that behavior in constructive and positive ways that reinforce our intellectual values and transform them into action for the common good – to take on and embrace responsibility and obligation.

However, as academics and scholars we are trained to be impartial and objective, to subordinate our feelings and emotions in favor of statistics and data. And it is impressed upon us and reinforced that experience and living and sensing are to be repressed and replaced with Western-focused disciplined and unbiased scientifically designed inquiry. To engage and to participate and to advocate is to introduce bias and to taint pure science with opinion.

Within the world of pure scholarship we are trained to observe from an ivory tower and to remove ourselves from the findings and their consequences. It does not matter what we know to be true – a good scholar does not think that way; we must be able to prove and document and explain in order for knowledge to have value. And if we insert

ourselves into the experience, we cannot be impartial and we cannot have confidence in our analyses.

So we build a wall between our lives as academics and the real world. We convince ourselves that there is an importance to our work that exceeds our role as individuals, that is more important than our personal beliefs. We claim that it is not our job to advocate but rather to provide good information and let others decide how to act upon it. This is what we are trained to do, and what is rewarded within the academy in the form of funding and grants, promotion and tenure, and publication of our ideas.

And we pass this impartiality down through our teaching to our students. We encourage them to look at the world through unbiased and non-judgmental eyes. We tell them that the university and the college are spaces where knowledge is shared and disseminated, but not necessarily where that knowledge is acted upon. Action is for the real world and the university is altogether separate from that world – a place where we can refine our knowledge and skills without consequence.

If I have learned anything during twenty-five years of teaching, I have learned that no teaching is or ever can be impartial. It must be, and always is, situated in a cultural context, an historical flow, an economic

condition. Teaching must be toward something; it must take a stand; it is either for or against.

When we choose topics to discuss in class, when we agree to a curriculum, when we present theories and hypotheses, we are making choices of what to share with students. Their understanding of the world, their perspective on critical debates, their knowledge of the key facts, will be determined in part by what we as teachers choose to put in front of them and the way that we approach that information and discussion. In other words, we are providing our support for or recommendation of a particular way of thinking, of the data students should consider, and the framing of that information. We are advocating.

If we choose to include information on Columbus' discovery of America in our classes we are advocating to students that this information is worthy of their consideration. If we introduce that there are skeptics of human-induced climate change and that this skepticism is valid as one of many reasonable conclusions to draw from scientific knowledge that exists, we allow students to build their beliefs around this. If we accept in our teaching, either actively or passively, that nature exists to serve humans, we reinforce those ideas in the minds of our students. If our teaching includes the underlying assumption that rights are bestowed only

upon humans and not upon other-than-human modes of being, we miss the opportunity to think critically about how our beliefs guide our behavior. And in turn we advocate for what exists, not for what is possible.

I have, more recently, made a commitment in my teaching to embrace advocacy, and to unabashedly and wholeheartedly attempt to teach for justice.

What does this mean?

- Engaging students in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, obstacles to their freedom, obstacles to their responsibility and obligations to all beings, obstacles to their ability to advocate for others, and then to drive against those obstacles
- The fundamental message of teaching for justice is: You can change the world.

What I try to be for is an awareness, a consciousness, an ability to critically analyze that makes injustice unendurable. What I am against is exploitation and domination, in all forms.

So, embedded in teaching for justice is advocacy. It is the intersection of belief and action that comprises critical thinking.

College campuses are expected to be safe spaces for imagining how to transform society, and at the same time a sanctuary

from the worst of society. Often, administrators and faculty aspire to make college campuses a place in which profound social cleavages -- racial, partisan, economic -- exist only as abstract issues that we can have a "common good conversation" about, rather than as real conflicts that can and should be confronted.

If we are creating safe spaces, it should be for the exploration of ideas and tactics to advance justice. It is more important that we create a space on our campuses where students can experiment and learn to stop exploitation and domination in the world than that we create equal space for ideas that objectify, marginalize, disparage, and repress the least advantaged within our society. Students need to be able to learn through trial and error how to respond to oppression-- and what better place than a college campus? We need to prioritize justice over the "right" of oppressive ideas and structures to persist.

As Thomas Berry observes, "Of the institutions that should be guiding us into a viable future, the university has a special place because it teaches all those professions that control the human endeavor. In recent centuries the universities have supported an exploitation of the Earth by their teaching... Our educational institutions need to see their purpose not as training personnel for exploiting the Earth but as guiding students toward an intimate

relationship with the Earth. For it is the planet itself that brings us into being, sustains us in life, and delights us with its wonders. In this context we might consider the intellectual, political, and economic orientations that will enable us to fulfill the historical assignment before us – to establish a more viable way into the future” (The Great Work, 1999, x).

If the academy, the college, the university, is to be transformed, it cannot lose the commitment to critical thinking. This has always been and should always remain at the core. But what must be transformed is what critical thinking means. It cannot be limited to belief, but must guide action.

If there is to be a revolution in our social values – one that recognizes the intrinsic value of all other-than-human modes of people and that is explicit in human responsibility to protect all people – it must begin through education. We must change our beliefs by integrating the knowledge that is apparent all around us and then using this knowledge to guide our action.

Recognizing the failures of our education systems of the past involves committing to advocacy in our teaching that is based on critical thinking. We must decolonize education and learn from Indigenous populations the world over who understand and appreciate what Thomas Berry calls “the spontaneities found in every form of

existence in the natural world, spontaneities that we associate with the wild – that which is uncontrolled by human dominance. We misconceive our role if we consider that our historical mission is to ‘civilize’ or to ‘domesticate’ the planet, as though wildness is something destructive rather than the ultimate creative modality of any form of earthly being. We are not here to control. We are here to become integral with the larger Earth community.” (48)

So let’s learn to change our values and to embrace revolutionary beliefs. And let’s learn to act.