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Social Justice Education in Higher Education: A Conversation with Rev. Dr. Jaime Washington

Jaime Washington & The Editorial Board of the Journal of Critical Thought
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**Social Justice in Higher Education:
A Conversation with Rev. Dr. Jamie Washington**

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The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis has traditionally published interviews with individuals who have strong connections to our special issue topics. We believe that interviews are important ways to contribute to the conversation surrounding critical issues in social justice. This interview features Dr. Rev. Jamie Washington, who provides insight into his life as a social justice educator and his views on the field of social justice as well as valuable advice to those wanting to make positive and transformative institutional change.

Keywords: Evolution of Social Justice | Social Justice in Higher Education

Q: Can you think of the salient experience that guided you to the work you are currently doing?

I started doing social justice work as a young child. I have been committed for most of my life to the tenants of “liberty and justice for all.” However, as an undergraduate student, I began to learn the important role that education played in moving our society forward. It was then that I decided that the way to have the greatest change was to work with our country’s and the world’s future leaders. Thus, college and universities are the places I’ve found my work to be the most applicable.

I started my career as a student affairs professional with aspirations to become a chief student affairs officer, president, or faculty member. While I had a very successful career in higher education both as a faculty member and administrator, I never imagined that I would be serving as a full-time consultant to higher education. I left University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) in 2001 to answer a call to ministry and during that time, I got clear that my gifts and talents were needed in a different way than that of a person working on one campus. I saw that the landscape of higher education was changing faster than our institutions and that there was a need for skilled professionals to help campus leaders prepare for this change.

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Q: How would you describe the current state of social justice issues in higher education? What about student affairs specifically?

I think that social justice is all over the place in higher education. I'll start by saying that much of the lack of one clear answer to this question is due to the lack of clarity around what we mean by social justice. Institutions often struggle for many years trying to define what they mean by words like "social justice," "inclusion," "diversity," "multiculturalism," and more. As a result, institutions end up spinning their wheels because no one knows what we actually mean. If the leadership does not have a clear definition of what these words mean, then they can't provide a vision to guide the efforts, and without a vision, the effort flounders.

This is not the case everywhere. In the places where there is a clear definition of these terms and a clear vision that is connected to the institutional mission and strategic plans, social justice efforts are moving forward in some very positive ways. There are many great examples of campus initiatives to create greater inclusion and culture change. However, without strategic and intentional leadership, accountability, and an understanding of culture change dynamics, these efforts are short-lived and have minimal impact.

Student affairs has taken the lead on many campuses in the area of social justice and inclusion. Because of the direct interaction that student affairs staff members have with students in and outside of the classroom, it has been important for student affairs professionals to develop skills and knowledge to help them serve students most effectively. While most student affairs professionals understand the importance of diversity and social justice, the skills and competencies to engage effectively across difference varies greatly depending on the training, personal commitment, and expectations of the department or institution in which they serve.

Q: In the last ten years, what progress have you witnessed in social justice work? In the next ten years, what do you consider to be of utmost importance in social justice work?

I have seen a great deal of change in the last ten years. The conversation about social justice has moved from one that focuses on "underrepresented" populations to one that includes all of us. The conversation is beginning to move beyond numbers, to address campus climate and culture for the numbers of "diverse" students we serve. I have seen institutional leadership realize the need for strategic leadership in this area with the creation of "Chief Diversity Officer" positions. I have seen graduate programs in student affairs and higher education increase their course offerings to help prepare the next generation of professionals to be better equipped to serve all students across difference.

All of these changes are great, and the work must continue in each of these areas. I believe that there are four key things that must be in place for continued positive growth in the area of social justice and inclusion on campus:

- Clear institutional leadership and commitment. This requires a clear vision and understanding of the value that diversity adds to the educational experience and an intentional and strategic plan to move the institution forward.

- A willingness to create opportunities for faculty and staff to get clear about the work they need to do to become more effective and competent to achieve the vision.
- A willingness to listen and trust the voices of underrepresented populations of students, faculty, and staff when they see things that are not congruent with the stated values and vision. Institutions must also be prepared to engage and address these issues.
- Finally, there must be a willingness to “stay in it.” Institutional and systemic cultural change does not happen overnight. There are no quick fixes. There must be a willingness to keep moving forward in the midst of small numbers, resistance, and “failed” pilot programs.

Q: Where should we be moving in the field of social justice in higher education?

This question requires an honest assessment of where we are. The answer to this question is different for each institution, division, department, functional area, and staff person. Thus, we must start with a clear vision and definition of where we want to be, and then consider what the current state is. We must do a gap analysis and then think strategically and intentionally about how to close the gap.

It is important to understand that this effort is ongoing and that it must be taken on with an understanding that we will never get it all done. However, institutions should consider what they are doing to create an environment that prepares all of its students to lead in the 21st century.

Q: What advice would you give to a new professional in the field who is passionate about doing the work of social justice?

First, I would like to say thank you for your passion and energy, and I want you to share honestly with your elders what they are missing. I would also like to offer the following tips for being able to stay effective and healthy in the work:

- Take a deep breath and know that the work is important, but you are not going to “fix” your institutions, supervisors, peers, or students.
- Be sure to continue doing your own “healing” work so that you show up as a clear instrument to help the change effort.
- Build yourself a network of people who can challenge you to learn and grow. This should be a group of people who care enough about you to tell you the truth, and not just what you want to hear.
- Commit to deepening your own awareness of both your “dominant” and “subordinated” group memberships. Learn what internalized oppression and internalized dominance looks like in your everyday life. Consider the concepts of collusion and privilege, and learn how to discuss these issues with passion and commitment but without guilt, shame, and defensiveness.
- Finally, know that everyone in higher education will not and should not have the same level of passion and commitment to social justice issues as you. If they did, we would not need you. The planet needs you to do your part and needs others to do what they are passionate about. Don’t get bogged down in why it feels like you

are the only one or one of a handful of people who ever raise these issues. Learn to raise the issues in ways that people learn and institutions change even if you are the only one doing it.

Q: How do you feel that you've grown and changed during your time at SJTI?

In 1998, when Vernon Wall, Kathy Obear, Maura Cullen and I founded the Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI), we had no idea of what it would mean for us or the profession. We were simply hoping to create an opportunity for primarily student affairs folks who were committed to social justice to continue doing personal growth work. Now 14 years later, I would say that not only have we shared this growth opportunity with nearly 1500 people from across the country, but each of those people have left and carried the message into their institutions and their personal lives. As for me, I am more conscious of all of my dominant and subordinated identities. I am more comfortable with multiple truths and much more able to be with people where ever they are on the journey. I am in touch with the difference in cognitive knowledge and real relationship with myself and others. I feel that I am a much clearer instrument for change because I get to be intentional for five days, two-three times a year, to slow myself down, reflect, and engage this topic at a deeper level.

Q: What has been the biggest challenge for you doing social justice work?

One of the biggest challenges for me is working with individuals and organizations that want a checklist response to fix all social justice issues and challenges. There is often no willingness to engage the process of creating a more socially just campus. There often is a desire to get to the end state without taking the time and steps needed to move through in an effective and sustainable way.

Another challenge for me is social justice educators who feel like they are the only ones who know what's going on. I refer to this as "social justice arrogance." This behavior creates a dynamic on campuses and in organizations that leave some people feeling like they want nothing to do with this conversation or this effort. While I don't want to make anger, passion, and a sense of urgency a problem, it is important to consider how we engage people who may have a different level of understanding and experience with social justice issues. I often hear when I go to campuses, "You are preaching to the choir." This statement is made when there is a session offered that is not required. In these sessions, we often see the same faces and a smattering of those who wanted to make sure they are seen at the event. When in this space, I often say, "It's obvious to me that the choir needs rehearsal." If the choir is singing and people are not coming, maybe we should check out the choir.

Finally, I find that it is challenging to do this work if people are not willing to deal with conflict, discomfort, and resistance. No real cultural change has ever happened without some form of resistance. It is important for change leaders to increase their level of competence to engage resistance and discomfort.

Q: How do you sustain yourself in this work?

This is a great question. I spend a good bit of time talking with other social justice educators and advocates about self-care. I used to believe that I was too busy trying to change the

world to be concerned with taking care of myself. I'm glad to say that I have grown and that is no longer how I live. I believe that it is a trap that many of us who are passionate about social justice fall into. As a result, many of us are working stressed, overwhelmed, angry, and burnt out. Here are my top five tips for sustainability in this work:

- First of all, we must release the notion that we are going to get it all done. There will always be more work to do. There will always be another intervention and another conversation you could have had. Oppression did not start with us, and it will not end with us. My sustaining mantra is - "My work is not to fix it; my work is to leave it better than I found it." This mantra helps me to honor the shoulders that I stand on, and to leave a healthy legacy for the people who will come behind me and continue the work.
- The second thing I do to sustain myself is to stay open to feedback and deeper learning about myself in all of my identities. I see it as a wonderful human adventure. I love the process and what I continue to discover. This openness keeps me humble and helps me to show up compassionately with others.
- The third thing that sustains me is staying connected to the scholarship and the trends and the new things that people are doing. I want to stay current and I want to be able to engage across generations and communities. I also seek to be in environments where people may know more than I do. It's important for me not to always be the smartest person in the room in regards to social justice.
- The fourth thing is that, as much as I am willing to learn from the next generation and others, I also accept my place in this work as a senior professional. In accepting this place, I realize I have a responsibility to teach and prepare the next generation and to serve as a role model and mentor to those who will continue the work.
- The fifth and final thing I do to sustain myself is that I try to have a lot of fun. I have a lot of love in my life. While social justice is not just what I do, it's who I am. However, I am also more than that. I am a partner, a brother, a pastor, a grandfather, an uncle, a musician, a really good cook, and a lover of movies. I am a theatre person. I am a person who loves the feeling in my body after I've gotten to work out for an hour, and I am a person who always wants to spend more time with friends. What I am saying is, GET A LIFE! It is so important that those of us who are leaders in this work keep perspective. Life is beautiful, hard, unpredictable, and exciting. We must live life to its fullest in order to be in this work for the long haul.

Q: How do you think the field of social justice has changed?

The field continues to evolve as the scholarship and the access to it changes. Some key things I see are:

- The definition of social justice today has been expanded beyond a race-focused discussion. While many institutions still spend a good bit of time in race-based assessments and efforts, there is a growing understanding that social justice is about more than race, and race is about more than "Black and White."

- The conversation is no longer just focused on learning about “the Other” or underrepresented populations, but it has evolved to be about who we all are together and what happens as we learn more about being members of dominant and subordinated groups and identities.
- The other major change is that institutions have finally gotten clear that it’s not enough to increase numbers of the diverse “Other” and not enough just to create a space so they feel safe and comfortable. Institutions are doing much more to create systemic cultural change through cultural audits, climate assessments, process mapping, and strategic planning.

These are just things that I see as significant changes that will inform our work for the next decade.

Q: Who are some people who inspire you?

I am inspired by people who are real and authentic. I am inspired by people who want to leave the world a better place. I am inspired by people who are willing to be pioneers and those who are not afraid to become the icons for an issue even though that’s not the reason they raised the question or concern. I am inspired by people who are compassionate, honest, and self-loving. I am inspired by children because of their amazing way of getting to the heart of a matter without pretense. I love the honesty in their questions and curiosity. I am inspired by the wisdom of my elders. I love learning from those who did so much with so little.

When I think of people who have these qualities, the following individuals come to mind: my mother - Annette Washington; my grandparents - Thurman and Elizabeth Williams; my pastor - Elder Harris Thomas; my sisters - Gale and Cheryl Washington; my partner - Rev. Sam Offer; and my grandson - Roman Blake. These are real people in my life who inspire me on a daily basis. Yes, there are iconic people who I look to, but not nearly as much as these people.

Q: What books and scholarship do you revisit time and time again?

As a social justice educator, I am happy to say that there is an enormous amount of scholarship that is present today to help us do our work. However, because I love foundational work, I refer everyone to *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* and *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. Both the first and second editions of these writings provide a solid foundation for understanding the process and the goal of social justice.

Q: If you had to pick one memory that represents your philosophy, what would it be and why?

I was working with a group of very bright students in a summer bridge program back in June. This group was very racially mixed. I asked the students to reflect on one of their greatest fears as they started their experience on campus. A young African American woman stood up and said that she was worried that people would look at her and judge her

as not smart enough to be on campus or in the scholarship program. I asked her, “Why would they judge you as not being smart enough or deserving?” She struggled to get to naming that she was essentially concerned about how racial stereotypes and racism would impact her experience. I finally got her to name the race dynamic that she was concerned about and asked her what kept her from just saying that up front. She indicated that she did not want to get seen as “playing the race card.” This memory leads me to my core philosophy in this work - “Cut the crap!” It’s time to have real dialogue. The only way to move to real inclusion is to have real conversations and develop real relationship within and across difference. We must be able to engage the dynamics of power, privilege, and entitlement. After we got to the real issue of her fear, I then asked the White students, “How many of you share her concern because of race?” No one raised their hand. I then shared, “That’s what White privilege looks like.”

Q: How do you see religion and social justice working collectively? Alternatively, what tensions do you see existing between religion/spirituality and social justice work? What advice do you have for living with those tensions?

I think religion and social justice work collectively. In a broad sense, depending upon where you enter the religious conversation and what religion means to you and how you understand it, whether it is a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, or other tradition, religion and social justice might feel like synonymous terms. There is absolutely no tension or disconnect around any of it. So, I need to name that upfront; there are plenty of folks who are extremely committed to their religious knowing, teaching, and way of being and that means that for them, social justice is at the foundation. Thus, liberty and justice for all people regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, first language, etc. is a religious tenant for them. Likewise, there are folks who enter this discussion from a religious place of exclusion. This looks different depending on who you are talking to. For many religiously conservative or fundamentalist individuals, social justice must be understood in the context of their specific religious teaching or doctrine. This tension can create opportunities for difficult dialogues. Social justice educators need to carefully engage how religion as an institution, not an individual’s religious beliefs, is a part of the cycle of oppression. Thus, we must allow more conservative individuals the opportunity to explore their religious teachings from a place that does not feel disrespectful.

These conversations and explorations can be had in a healthy way when we, as social justice educators and advocates, have done our own work as it relates to religion and spirituality. If we as educators get triggered and shut down in religious conversations, we must do our work to figure out what that’s about so that we can show up more genuinely and effectively in the dialogue.

Author Notes

Dr. Rev. Jamie Washington is the President and Founder of the Washington Consulting Group, a firm focused on human development, leadership, and management and based in Baltimore, MD (<http://www.washingtonconsultinggroup.us>). He is also an ordained minister currently serving as an Associate Minister at Unity Fellowship Church of Baltimore and one of the founders of the Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI). Over the

past 20 years, he has worked as a scholar, practitioner, activist, consultant, and administrator in higher education and social justice. In these various roles, Rev. Dr. Washington has continued to inspire, influence, and motivate individuals and entire organizations to embrace social justice as a way of being and to join him in the process to create structural and institutional change.

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