

Preface

I can think of no more important curriculum topic or school culture and climate issue than social justice. Without a direct, purposeful, and critical consideration of how social justice plays out and is embodied in our school curriculum and classrooms and corridors, I fear that injustice, hate crimes, and ongoing marginalization will be our legacy. As educators, we can—and must—take the necessary steps to counteract the negative consequences bred from ignoring injustice, sidestepping hate speech, and tolerating marginalization.

I like to think of education as a gentle rain on a thirsty soul. I did not make up this definition. It came out of a discussion about education I was having with my husband, a non-educator. Among other things, my husband is a social worker, an Anglican priest, and a noncredentialed theologian. It was his theological side that kicked in. Did you know, he said to me, that the Hebrew word for education is *early rain*?

Of course I didn't know that, but the concept intrigued me. *Early rain* connotes a gentleness and new birth and nature providing exactly what is needed for flowers and plants and animals to thrive. *Early rain* transforms the landscape in fundamental and meaningful and essential ways. Should we expect less from education? What would happen, I wondered, if we thought about education as an early rain, something that is provided with gentleness, that is unbidden, that soaks down to the essential aspect of the human condition, the soul? What would happen, indeed, if our purpose as educators is to do what gardeners do: ensure that every plant in our care thrived; that every child in our care became more whole, flourished, and added to the general beauty and well-being of the world?

What would happen? The weeds of injustice, hate, and marginalization would disappear. They would have to. Weeds and plants rarely flourish together.

The more difficult question, of course, is how do we, as educators, address a world littered with a history of bigotry, misunderstanding, and hatred of *others*? How do we keep up with the ever-changing onslaught of new manifestations of bigotry, misunderstanding, and hatred that permeate the media, that worm their way into conversations, that play out in

perverse policies, and that show up in malevolent individual and group actions?

In other words, how can we, as educators, make a difference? What do we need? What do our students need? How can we come together to honestly question and knowingly interrupt a system and ways of thinking that we have been conditioned to accept as normal?

GO TO THE PLACE WHERE NO ONE ELSE HAS BEEN

This book is an attempt to answer these questions. It is both a portrayal of my experiences as a White middle-class teacher, administrator, and professional developer on a lifelong quest to become an ally in the battle for social justice. This portrayal is dissected and sifted through a social justice lens as a way of elucidating the many concepts and theories that play into the work of a social justice ally.

In many ways, it is a storybook, and purposefully so. Stories leave room for interpretation and personalization.

Storytelling is a fundamental means of meaning making (Wells, 1987). It is part of our DNA. We love to hear and retell stories. Isn't that what we do when we get together with friends or when we need to illustrate a point? Stories anchor abstract ideas in an accessible medium. They take the sting out of emotionally charged experiences. They personalize and connect.

I know it is desirable, certainly fashionable, and undoubtedly comforting for authors to provide readers with a blueprint, an irrefutable-sounding, authority-imbued list of the ten next steps or five most powerful best practices or the three things you need to know in order to do whatever it is the book is about, along with a detailed description of what the desired outcome will look like, feel like, sound like and how it will operate. But I will not do that. I will not do this for one reason. I do not have a foolproof definitive recipe to become an ally in the battle for social justice. Nor should you. The reason is because it does not exist. A socially just world needs to be created. A socially just world is a work in progress. The end point, a new order, cannot be fathomed from our current vantage point.

My position is quite simple, but it springs from the coming together of many disparate ideas, the inevitable lessons learned from a lifetime of experiences, and the deep suspicion that complex issues defy simple solutions. There is no single, foolproof way to become an ally in the battle for social justice. There is no single, foolproof way to create the socially just world our marginalized students crave and allies desperately desire for them. If I provided you with a blueprint, a list of next steps or a litany

of how-tos, I would rob you of your personhood, your uniqueness, your opportunity for soul searching, the joy of deep thinking, and perhaps most importantly, the chance for you to exercise your creativity, and that would be an injustice.

Ally work, the desire to change the world, is creative work. How can we, stuck as we are in a place where injustice thrives, know exactly how to build a better life, a society based upon the best in human civilization? In the post-apartheid world of South Africa, there is a strong recognition that the political transformation that took place in the 1990s requires a “second transition.” This second transition, it is said, is needed to tackle the sticky residue of long-standing social and value systems that newly earned political rights left untouched.

I believe that ally work requires more than just a second transition. I believe it requires commitment to an open, adaptable, creative transition. Ally work is ongoing. It is messy. It is anything but linear and developmental. There will be setbacks, to be sure, but there will also be brilliant bursts of unexpected adjustment, glorious adaptation, and ingenious renegotiation. The results can be breathtaking, in much the same way emerging from fog that hides and distorts what is on the other side can be. Once the fog is traversed, once it is lifted, once the sun pierces its swirling cloudiness, what emerges is new and bright and glorious and often an unexpected and certainly unpredictable landscape. It is, in a very real sense, a new creation.

Ally work, like painting a picture, writing a poem, or composing music, requires fluidity, adaptation, constant adjustment, ongoing evaluation, constant revisiting. It is through these processes that works of art are created. The prolific artist, the productive writer, the inexhaustible composer possess a general idea, a nagging urge, a visionary desire to make something glorious out of the blank canvas, the wordless page, the note-less sheet music. The painter, the writer, the composer plunge in, they dig deep, and they trust the process. They fearlessly engage, charging ahead into unknown territory. They intuitively know that creativity is a place where no one else has been. Allies, too, need to fearlessly enter and charge ahead to that place where social justice thrives, that place where no one else has been.