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From Privilege, A Call For Social Justice

By ADAM HOWARD

For as long as I can remember, I have been committed to social justice. Even before I knew what this means or could do much about this commitment, I recognized the injustices in the world around me. I was determined to do something about them.

Growing up in extreme poverty, as I did, it wasn't too difficult for me to recognize injustices. I was raised in a small town on the edges of Appalachia, one of the poorest regions of the United States. My parents were unable to work on a regular basis because of poor health and disabilities. We survived mainly on what others, who were about as poor as we were, generously provided. They gave us food, mostly, even a place to live.

My mom was not one of those parents who kept the details of living in poverty from us. From an early age, I knew how difficult it was for my parents to make ends, if not meet, then at least come close enough for us to have clothes on our backs, a roof over our heads, and food on the table. To cope with these realities, I imagined how life for my family and others in my community could be otherwise. Little around me fed my imagination. But that did not stop me from extending my vision of what should and could be. These hopes for a better future were the beginnings of my commitment to social justice. My commitment originated from a desire to make sense of the world around me, to stabilize a worldview scarred by poverty.

As I came to understand the capacity of education to change life circumstances, this commitment led me to teaching. I learned that teachers can make a profound difference in their students' lives through the example of one of my teachers, Mr. Mattingly. I arrived in his seventh-grade English classroom essentially unable to read or write. Up to that point, my poverty had been misdiagnosed as a learning disability. In fact, I had been labeled unable to learn. But Mr. Mattingly saw something different in me. From seventh grade until I graduated from high school, he often stayed after school with me to provide additional instruction and to offer guidance about the choices that confronted me. Through his mentoring, college became a reality for me, and I found a way out of poverty. I wanted to have the same influence on students that he'd had on me.

I had imagined that I would spend my career teaching students from a similar class background as my own. Strangely enough, my interest in working with poor students led me to an elite secondary school for my first job out of college. The school sponsored an educational outreach program for disadvantaged students of color, and I was director of this program and a teacher. I spent my workdays split between two very different worlds. I taught at the private school in the morning and then worked in urban public schools in the afternoon.

Although I faced many struggles in my work with urban schools, I soon discovered that my life and educational experiences had prepared me less for the life as a private school teacher. I found the culture of this school disconnected from what I knew and held to be true.

Like many other affluent youth in the United States, my students at the private school were insulated from such forms of human suffering as poverty, homelessness, and hunger. They were mostly clustered in isolated, class-segregated communities with beautiful homes, excellent schools, and little crime. They had little contact with the "ugly" life circumstances of so many others in nearby communities and throughout the world.

In our discussion, several sources of motivation for their social justice efforts surfaced: feelings of guilt and obligation, desire to give back, moral and spiritual values, and empathy. They were also motivated by self-interest.

What could motivate such students to become committed to social justice? I have spent the past 15 years trying to answer this question.

During this past year, I explored this question with a group of Colby students in a focus group. These students identified themselves as white, from class privilege, and committed to social justice. In our discussion, several sources of motivation for their social justice efforts surfaced: feelings of guilt and obligation, desire to give back, moral and spiritual values, and empathy. They were also motivated by self-interest.

The term “self-interest” is defined commonly as selfish concern or personal advantage. The students, however, pointed out that what may be in their own interest may also benefit others. They provided examples of the ways that they were rewarded for their participation in social justice: positive acknowledgement from peers, family members, and authority figures, and gaining positive life and work experiences. Working toward social justice also helped them feel better about themselves and develop meaningful relationships with people who are different from themselves. But their efforts toward improving children’s lives through tutoring and mentoring, and addressing unmet needs of local and faraway communities, for example, also benefited many others. They were positively impacting the world around them.

These privileged students disrupted the notion that benefits to themselves only come by excluding benefits to others. They believe in quite the opposite. They recognize that injustices come at a cost to everyone, not just the disadvantaged. Injustice negatively affects relationships, safety, health, resources, and an overall quality of life. Much like my own reasons for becoming committed to social justice after a life of poverty, they came from a privileged world but still imagined something different that would benefit not only others but also themselves.

Associate Professor of Education Adam Howard, current chair of the Education Program, received his bachelor’s degree from Berea College, his master’s degree from Harvard University, and his Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati. To hear Howard speak about his Teachers College Record article, “Elite Visions: Privilege, Perceptions of Self and Others,” visit www.colby.edu/mag, keyword: tcrecord.