

The Power of Intention

I would like us to explore the relationship between intent and impact. This exploration is important because if we are going to spend our energy embracing social justice and equality principles, then we must ensure that our desire to do good, our efforts to be good people, actually match with the ways in which we impact others. Knowing how we impact others is important because there are many who are continuously affected by our individual and collective state of unawareness, a state of unawareness that as well intended people we can't afford to sustain.

Today, as a society, we collectively embrace egalitarian principles of fairness, social justice, and equality. We don't wake up in the morning remembering happily all the bad things we have done. We don't go through our day looking forward to being selfish, self-centered, and mean. We don't normally feel good about being cruel to others. Even those people who we may perceive as evil do not necessarily see themselves as evil. Therefore, if we have a tendency to see ourselves as good people and others as evil, if we have a general inclination to justify our actions, who is actually been cruel and mean? I believe that we all have a social responsibility to explore the relationship between intent and impact as a way to ensure we are actually impacting the world in positive ways. I believe that exploring our individual and collective state of mind is essential considering the fact that although we live in a society full of people feeling good about their collective deeds, we continue to see poverty, abuse, murders, and suffering. In sum, despite our best intentions, the world continues to be a pretty messy place.

I believe the reason why social injustices and inequalities continue in our country today, despite the fact that we are good people, is that the fabric of our social principles is dysfunctional. In our country we talk about equal opportunities, we talk about the power of individual achievements; we embrace meritocratic notion that suggest that those who work hard enough, those who want something really bad, can accomplish their dreams. And although there may be some truth within these principles, the problem resides in the fact that success and failure are not solely determined by our individual strength, commitment, and desire to reach our personal goals. Choices are influenced by the support or lack of support we may have or lack from our social environment. In other words, individuals need others to be able to make their dreams come true. They cannot do it all alone. Yet, the fallacies of our collective values imply that one can do it all alone, if he or she really wants it. Yet, when we disconnect individuals from their socioeconomic and emotional reality, we begin to point fingers and make accusations (directly or indirectly) about those who do not make it. I believe that this disconnection, our capacity to create a separation between society and the individual is deeply rooted on individualistic, meritocratic, and capitalist principles that suggest we live in a country where we all have equal access to opportunity and fairness.

Today, we live in a society where those who become criminals, those who live in poverty, those who collect welfare, are often viewed as people who made personal choices to fail. In other words, they decided (consciously or unconsciously) to be lazy. They decided to choose the wrong path, to not work hard, and reaped what they sowed and as result, they received what they deserve. This particular understanding of the situation is dysfunctional in a number of different ways, especially because it

undermines the socioeconomic systemic conditions that produce particular undesired outcomes. In sum, sociologists can determine how long we'll live, our life expectancy, based on our zip code.

By disconnecting the socioeconomic conditions of those in poverty and measuring their success under the assumption that we all play in a leveled playing field, by disconnecting and undermining the systemic and structural problems which led/lead to predictable levels of failure, we get to feel good about ourselves, about our hard earned accomplishments, while viewing others as deciders of their own failures, as people lacking character and the desire to succeed. After all, we often tell ourselves that we know how hard we worked for what we have, thereby those who do not reach their goals, simply lack the strength to make it. They are weaker.

I want us to start considering the indirect-direct ways in which our statements, our actions, our principles affect others. I want us to start thinking about what allows us to feel very little compassion for the misery of others. For instance, when we say that if one works hard, one achieves his or her dreams... what are we indirectly saying about those who don't make it? What are we indirectly saying about those who don't reach their dreams? What are we indirectly saying about those who live in welfare, and poverty?

The problem with meritocracy, rooted deeply on capitalist ideologies, is that it ignores and undermines our history of oppression and discrimination. Through the lens of meritocracy we create the illusion of a leveled playing field. In other words, the problem is rooted in our systemic incapacity to understand that our history, our actions of the past, shape our present, and that the advantages of the past lead to more advantages in the present. Yet, when we ignore our history, when we ignore the structural inequities that produce massive unequal outcomes, we can embrace concepts of equal opportunities, individual achievement with much more ease. After all, we get to feel as if we choose our own destiny.

I was listening to NPR a couple of days ago, and they were interviewing a young African American boy from a poor neighborhood in NY. The program explored a murder that took place in the neighborhood. What struck me the most was the young boy's ending statement. He said, "I don't know how long I will live. I don't know if I am gonna get shot, or when I am gonna get shot. People get shot around here all the time. I am scared."

I can only imagine what the life of this young boy may be like. The stress of being born into poverty and violence. Yet, if or when he breaks down due to his harsh socioeconomic reality, many will judge him, point fingers, and somewhere along the way, say something along the lines of... "he had a choice." I am sorry, but the choice he could have made was very different from the one someone could have made in a stable and supportive environment. And when a few people rise above all adversity and make something out of their lives, they are used as examples of philosophies that claim: "it can be done," which directly lead to more pointing fingers and more judging of those who did not rise above all the chaos and adversity.

The reality is that most of us would break down in a stressful and hostile environment; most are would be taken down by the current. But for the most part we see people crumble under hostile environments while ignoring and undermining the systemic flaws that led to failure. We ignore the interconnectedness

nature of our past and our present decisions, and at the same time we still manage to feel good about ourselves because these criminals, these unsuccessful people made their bed and now they are laying on it.

When I think about race in this country, I hear many people suggest that race conversations are what preserve racism. Some people say that it is time to move on. Some people claim to be color blind. We live in a society where most of us believe that we are no longer racist. That racism belongs in the past. That we are a progressive egalitarian society and racism is no longer socially acceptable. Well, if that is the case, I wonder why it is that 85% of white people live in white communities. I wonder why we find most well funded schools to be white. I wonder why schools of color are for the most part underfunded. Why do people of color live shorter lives? Why do Black and Latinos account for 60% of America's 2.3 million prisoners, yet they comprise 25% of the national population? Why does less than 1/5 of the total student population (people of color) make up 1/2 of the suspensions & expulsions? Why infant mortality, heart disease, and cancer is much more prevalent among people of color? Why college-educated Black people are more likely to experience unemployment than college educated White people. Why is it that even after adjustment for income, education, gender and age, Black people have higher scores on blood pressure, inflammation, and total risk behavior? Why do we see these racial disparities in 2013 if racism is no longer an issue?

What cognitive and sociological research tells us is that although overt racism is no longer socially acceptable, but we still carry baggage from our past. Baggage that affects all of us in a number of different ways. The reality is that we are fed numerous stereotypes through multiple repetitive messages in the media and when combined with an actual lack of opportunities to develop and create meaningful relationship with people of color, we almost have no choice but to form unconscious negative thoughts about what we know very little about.

Research tells us that most people in the US have a tendency to prefer white. Harvard implicit bias test explores our unconscious thought process and determines that even people of color have an unconscious tendency to prefer white. We associate white with goodness. One just has to take a closer look at Western religions to find these associations between the divine, purity, and the light with whiteness. Now, if we associate white with goodness, what do we associate blackness with?

Now, let us go back to our exploration of intent and impact, our desire to do good and the actual footprints we leave behind without exploring the structural-systemic problems. If we combine a pool a positive representations of whiteness with a pool of negative representations of blackness, in all forms, socially and religiously, how do we think these associations affect us all?

The purpose of this speech is not to say that we are bad people; the purpose of my speech is to remind us that we have a social responsibility to wake up and smell the coffee. Or as Socrates may suggest, to examine our unexamined lives.

From a logical perspective, it only makes sense that if only 50 years ago we were still going to segregated hospitals, it only makes sense that if only 50 years ago is when the Civil Rights Movement took place, that we have not yet overturned centuries of the most overt and brutal kinds of

discrimination. The ideology that made racism socially acceptable, still remains at many levels of our unconscious minds. The ideology that depicts people of color as less smart, less civilized, more dangerous and unpredictable still lives on. Or do we really think that when the government said discrimination was socially unacceptable, that everyone changed the mindsets shaped from generation after generation, and immediately started to like, trust, and be comfortable with diversity?

A part of me thinks that some of us do think in such ways simply because we point fingers about those we see as failure, lacking character, and strength, but ignore the legacy of systemic practices that place those who were oppressed in positions of disadvantage. And without doing anything to actually acknowledge and address the damage, we talk equal opportunities.

The purpose, the intent of my speech, is to ask us to see that our culture and our history shapes who we are today. This is not our fault, it is also not our parents or grandparents fault, these practices go before all of them, but my intent is to ask us to reflect on how this history, a history that we know so little about, a history that generally ignores the genocide of Native Americans, a history that ignores practices and policies that led to the socio-economic subjugation of people of color, a history that ignores the fact that Mexicans are more Americans than White people. As people who embrace principles of social justice and equality, we have a social responsibility to embrace awareness as well. This sort of awareness allows us to understand that after all, we are not bad people, we are all good people, white, black, brown, we are all good people. This sort of awareness also allows us to find systemic loopholes since we begin to view our society, as something that is affected through collective efforts rather than individual choices.

I personally carry some of this baggage. It is true that some of us have done more work and reflection than others on our tendency to be complacent and exist in socially homogeneous environments; it is true that for some of us find this information to be new and refreshing, it is true that some of us do not like this sort of conversation, it is also true that although I have clearly stated that we have inherited a dysfunctional system that some will view me as pointing the finger at them. The bottom line is that as I have stated previously, my intent is to have us take a moment to view our own life, our own surroundings, our own neighborhoods, our own circle of friends, our own experiences with diversity in order to ask ourselves, what else can I do. As people who believe in preserving the integrity of social justice and equality, what else can we do to help raise awareness, to understand our collective thought process, to understand our collective biases, to understand ourselves? This sort of exploration, rooted on a collective sense of introspection is what I believe Socrates meant when he asked us to examine our lives, since after all, "the unexamined life isn't worth living."

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