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Personal Manifesto: A Need for Change

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Emily Low

Dr. Houser

Social Justice

Personal Manifesto; A Need for Change

“What is social justice?”

The simple definition for social justice is “a concept of fair and just relations between the individual and society”. However, most people lack depth and true understanding about the social world and its ups and downs. Every society has a lower class as well as an upper class. No matter how well a society thrives, there is always going someone who isn’t caught up. It’s those who help the poor, the sick, and the ones who suffer injustice that shall be considered superheroes without capes. Personally, I strive to be in the criminal justice field for those who can’t defend for themselves. Most people describe lawyers as greedy and trying to win cases for their own benefit. I would not be practicing law for the money or for the feeling of winning, but rather the feeling of helping someone who has been shunned by society and suffers the effects of injustice. Social justice, in my own words, is a community helping the victims of injustice. I’m going to be describing situations that need to be addressed and are examples of how society needs to be more just. I don’t even want to know how America will turn out in the future if social problems never get resolved, or even looked at.

Most uninformed individuals claim that they understand what it’s like to be someone undergoing social injustice, but most of the time they can’t fully know. Society tends to believe

that everyone goes through identical situations. People who have been through living in poverty or being evicted can understand how others in that same situation feel. Personally, I can't ever claim to know what being in poverty is like because I have never fully experienced it. During social justice class we would read passages from book about the perspectives of people facing injustice, which was an eye opener to me. Reading about people with disabilities or people being evicted for the 10th time really helped me understand the issues in the social world. Being someone who has not been evicted before nor struggled with poverty on a severe level, I never focused on the hardships these individuals face. I want to dive into the messed up social world and understand the point of view of someone who doesn't have a strong voice. My interest in the criminal justice system enhanced as I read about so many people being wrongfully accused of crimes. I imagine being the person who saves someone from spending the rest of their lives in a cell and wondering how the world can be so cruel. Anyone who says the world is "fair" is a liar. I have read and watched people go through situations that nobody should have to go through, and experience hardships that are so difficult to even read.

Growing up in the large city of Austin, Texas, I have seen poverty all around me but never paid close attention to the people themselves. When you walk down the street you can see campsites constructed underneath the overpasses and old furniture set up like a makeshift house within them. The amount of homeless people living in Austin has increased dramatically due to overpopulation and the rise in housing costs. My own parents want to move out of Austin because the property taxes are so high, and the city is well beyond congested. Throughout Austin, there are facilities that provide basic food and shelter for the homeless. Sadly, most homeless in the downtown area are addicted to either drugs or alcohol, which is prohibited in every shelter. The new laws in Austin now allow the homeless to sleep anywhere on the streets,

which is causing so much controversy. Citizens want the police to remove many homeless individuals because they have this stereotype of them being dangerous, but most of the time the homeless people never commit any crimes. “The department had no intention of using the ordinance to ticket people except in “special situations”—in part because “if they end up in jail, they’ll just bounce back out.”” (Texas Monthly) Everyone in the city does not associate themselves with the homeless, and it is causing a dramatic drift between classes. Homeless people have no place to live, barely any food to sustain their health, and rarely have any help. Our community is supposed to help people in need, it’s a major factor in promoting social justice. I would love to see a non-profit organization that can help the homeless with mental illnesses. Imagine being alone in a big city with your only source of income is begging on the street ... now add acute or severe schizophrenia to that situation. People need help, especially dealing with a mental illness that strong. Even homeless people who deal with depression should have the opportunity to obtain psychological help without having to worry about any payments.

Another social justice issue that is prevalent in our society is stereotyping. Prime examples include police brutality and criminal convictions. My friend Kendarious explained to me how he was taught to behave when confronted by police, especially being an African American male. “My parents once told me when you get pulled over by the police you slowly put your drivers license, insurance, registration, and keys on top of your vehicle hood. You let all your windows down and put both of your hands out of the window and wait till the cop approaches you. With that being said, the cop has no reason to pull out his firearm and doesn’t feel threatened. He might think you’re being sarcastic, but in reality, you are just trying to save your life.” It’s sad to have a fear of being shot every time you get pulled over, knowing full well the cop who uses brutality would not be convicted of anything. Who would deny the cops’ story?

Stereotypes cause policemen to be extra cautious because they automatically assume a weapon or drugs are being used. We stereotype convicts as being dangerous, but what if the person convicted is overall innocent.

The criminal justice system has barely any justice within itself. People do not account for age, the way someone has been brought up, nor any mental illness concerns. For example, in “Just Mercy” by Bryan Stevenson, there was a boy name Ian who was sentenced to life in prison at 13 years old. “Even though he was thirteen, the judge condemned Ian for living in the streets, for not having good parental supervision, and for his multiple prior arrests for shoplifting and minor property crimes.” The concept of injustice in this situation is immortalizing to the boy. The number of children, thirteen years or older, has increased in prisons. “Florida had the largest population in the world of children condemned to die in prison for non-homicides.” (Stevenson, 154) The majority of kids who are sentenced in prison are either black or Latino. This proves how unjust the court system is, especially with stereotyping a child’s actions based on race. Social justice includes helping those who can’t speak up for themselves. In this example mentioned, the boy had past misconducts and a racial target on his back that decided his court ruling for him. Our society needs to clean up the criminal courts and replace the judges with people who can overlook minor misdemeanors and race and do a proper sentencing based on the actions of the accused. Immediately sentencing a boy who lived on the street to die in a jail cell for a crime that was a non-homicide is cruel. As a nation we claim to eliminate cruel and unusual punishment, so why can’t unfair punishments be a part of that? A child is going to spend the rest of his/her life... not just a couple years, but LIFE in a cell for something minor. We have no right to say that our justice system is fair in any way, and we can’t say that everyone has equal rights.

Another example of the messy justice system is sentencing those who have a mental disease. Before going into this topic, I want to address the fact that I'm not promoting mental illness as an excuse for a horrid crime, but rather an obstacle that should be addressed within a hearing. The fact that many mentally ill people end up in jail rather than a hospital for treatment is wrong. Most prisons are now considered warehouses for the mentally ill because of the abundance of them. As a society we view mentally ill patients as being "insane" or "crazy", which is normally not the case. Schizophrenia is a type of psychosis that destroys the victim and eliminates the person they once were. Schizophrenics lack the ability to love or trust and experiences hallucinations that are very vivid. These voices they hear tend to dominate them and can cause them to become further distant from reality. There are many patients with the disease that live a normal life, but also struggle to do so. In my own opinion, schizophrenia is one of the most terrifying mental diseases because it can develop in adolescence and late adulthood without any warning.

Jared Loughner was sentenced to life in prison for going on a mental rampage and killing fellow students. During the court hearing, 'the appeals court took him off medication; Jared went fifty hours without sleeping, paced until he had open sores on his feet, and stopped eating.' (Solomon, 341) With being placed on medication again, Jared would be considered competent to stand trial and ultimately receive the death penalty without pleading guilty. "Is it ethical and proper to help someone regain competence just to go after them with the death penalty offense or murder offense?" (Solomon, 341) I believe that a normal murder case should lead to life in prison or even the death penalty, but not for someone who has a mental disease overtakes majority of their actions. The fact that the court had removed the medication Jared was using just to prove that he had a mental illness is cruel, especially with the torture he experienced because

of it. Jared was clearly incompetent, both on and off his medication. I do believe that Jared could have been granted some psychiatric therapy instead of spending the rest of his life in the cell with no help. This society needs to have more lawyers on the side of those mentally incompetent because they can't normally stick up for themselves in trial. "There are at least three times as many mentally ill people in jail as in hospitals." (Solomon, 342) Prisons are now considered the warehouse for the mentally unstable. Society tends to want to remove those with a psychological disorder and place them in a facility that can silence them. Most people claim to be accepting of everyone, but most mentally ill people are ignored by everyone.

Death row consists of men and women who have committed capital offenses in death penalty states. In my opinion, some people deserve to be on death row. For example, Ted Bundy deserved to be on death row because of the large number of victims he had. Luckily the forensics department is advanced in technology because it took so long for murderers to be arrested because they couldn't figure out who had committed the crimes. Ted Bundy was a free man who committed murders from 1974 till 1978, and escaped prison twice. If they had the technology we do now, Bundy would not have murdered 30+ women nor would he be able to escape custody. Death row is meant for vicious killers just like Bundy, but sometimes life in prison is a better for some individuals. I know some people believe that death row is an unjust form of revenge, but isn't it what is deserved? I believe that if you take the life of an innocent person, you have no right to keep your own. However, I still believe that the only true being who can take a life is God. The main injustice with death row is those who are innocent and don't get their case re-examined. In "Just Mercy", Walter McMillian was framed by the sheriff and District Attorney for a murder he did not commit. McMillian was sent to death row as an innocent man.

There is show on Netflix called “The Innocent Man”, which explains the wrong convictions of the suspected murderers. The killing of Debby Carter in 1982 is one of the prime examples in the show. Ronald Keith Williamson was wrongly accused of the murder and was supposed to face the death penalty. Years later, after his conviction, there was evidence discovered that was not used in court. Tapes that were hidden from the court could have changed the entire prosecution. Especially the tape of another person’s confession that the court didn’t evaluate. Social justice is absent in the prosecution because evidence was hidden to the public. Most of the time, the criminal justice system just wants someone to be behind bars for a murder. They wouldn’t have to claim the case as “cold”, and they can feel victorious by putting a suspected murder behind bars. Even if that suspect was an innocent person, they would fall victim to the greedy judicial world. Many spend years, or even all their lives, in a cell for something they didn’t do. These are years the men/women will never get back. What do these people think about the justice system? They probably find it all corrupt and unfair, while they claim that all they want is to serve the people and put the evil citizens away. How many people are we claiming as “evil”, but they would never commit a murder or any crime for that matter? The saying “innocent until proven guilty” should always be motto in relation to criminal justice.

Is human trafficking considered a justice issue? Human trafficking is a problem that continues to be increasingly common. Sadly, the people who fall victim to trafficking are not totally random. Mainly economic status and gender decides who gets sucked into the horror of human trafficking. The states with the most human trafficking are California, New York, and Texas. All of which are centered in the big cities within each state, near the borders, and near shipment areas. Women who are in poverty are easy targets because they don’t have much self-defense or help to call. Economic status in general dictates who fails in society and who soars.

Women who live on the side of the road because they lack shelter could easily get picked up and sold as a slave. People who are willing to do anything for some form of income are the ones who end up getting locked up for a crime or are the ones who are victims of crime.

Now that many people are becoming more aware of social injustice, there are a lot of potential solutions we can try to start implementing. We can provide non-profit organizations to help with the mental health of the homeless in various cities. Some people can start a Law Firm that focuses on helping mentally ill patients go through proper sentencing. Or there could be a Law Firm that reexamines cold case files and possible mis convictions. Everyone should try to understand the society we live in, and eventually be more willing to help.

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