

BEYOND GREEN EGGS AND HAM: FROM REFUSAL TO ACCEPTANCE TO INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

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This article is a reflection on our journey to promote social justice education in a BSW program. The core of this narrative is Loretta's personal transformation, from refusing to take an elective Anne teaches called Diversity and Social Justice in Social Work Practice, on the grounds that it was "White-bashing", to becoming an anti-racism activist and spearheading a successful campaign to make the course a core requirement in the BSW curriculum. A secondary part of the narrative is of how we were able to establish a strong working relationship through our vast differences. Our goal is to share our reflections on the individual, interpersonal and institutional processes that led to Loretta's movement from personal questioning to public action so that other institutions, professors and students can learn from our experiences in order to support social justice education efforts that can result in similar transformations.

We are writing this article to reflect on our journey to promote social justice education in a social work program within a large public university in Texas from our perspectives as recent baccalaureate social work graduate, Loretta, and Assistant Professor, Anne. The core of this narrative is Loretta's personal and political transformation, from refusing to take an elective Anne teaches called Diversity and Social Justice in Social Work Practice, on the grounds that it was "white-bashing," to becoming an anti-racism activist and spearheading a successful campaign to make the course a core requirement in the BSW curriculum effective August 2011.

A secondary strand in this narrative is Anne's journey with Loretta as her academic advisor, instructor, student organization faculty advisor, change collaborator and mentor-friend. One of the challenges Anne experienced was making an adjustment to an entirely new student population and geography after living and teaching much of her adult life in New York City. As a social work educator committed to social justice education, Anne was unsure of how she would be accepted by the student body, given her life experience and perspective of the world was so different. Loretta symbolized this difference. Through the evolving relationship, Anne found that the differences and acknowledgement of them

enabled a rich and dynamic relationship, a lesson paralleled by Anne's relationship to the institution and the student body.

Our joint goal is to share our reflections on the individual, interpersonal and institutional processes that led to Loretta's movement from personal questioning to public action so that other institutions, professors and students can learn from our experiences in order to support social justice education efforts that can result in similar transformations. For ease of reading, this article will be written in Anne's voice with Loretta's journal reflections interspersed throughout the article. This article is the result of numerous discussions in person and through email in which we mutually tried to understand the many factors that led to Loretta's transformation. The narrative is organized according to the themes we identified in reflecting on our journeys.

Where We Started: Connecting Through Difference

Our journeys began when I was assigned to be Loretta's academic adviser in fall 2007, just after we had joined the university. Loretta had transferred from a community college as a "non-traditional" student, in her 30's, and I had recently moved to Texas from New York City, where I had lived and taught as an adjunct for many years. I moved to Austin with my husband and children because we could no

longer afford to live in New York and my father was happily settled here. In New York I had been teaching as an adjunct lecturer in two different social work programs; after the move I found work as an adjunct lecturer in two social work programs in Austin. A year later I found a position as a full-time lecturer in the BSW and MSW programs at my current university, which was located in a smaller town, and was hired the following year as an assistant professor.

Our institution is deeply committed to the goals of diversity, reflected in innovative student support programs that result in high retention and graduation rates for students of color and support for faculty and students in creating an inclusive campus environment. The Office of Multicultural Student Affairs supports student organizations and campus events that promote learning opportunities aimed at increasing campus awareness of multicultural and social justice issues. I was hired through the Target of Opportunity Program, which supports academic departments in building diverse faculty by funding available through the Provosts' Office.

I was excited to join a university that had such a clear commitment to promoting diversity. The school of social work has twenty three full-time faculty members, six of whom are people of color, three Latino, two African-American and one Asian (me). I volunteered to teach the Diversity and Social Justice elective, content which I have been teaching since 1999. When I started at the university, the course was called "Social Services to Minorities". I initiated changes in the course name and description that were supported by the BSW Committee and implemented soon thereafter. After graduate students expressed interest in the course, the Director changed the course to be "stacked", so that graduate students can take it with the undergrads but with graduate level assignments.

The view of the faculty was that issues of social justice and diversity are infused within the curriculum; hence there was no need for a separate course on this material. I have seen this view echoed in four out of the five programs where I have taught. It was evident

that material on social justice and diversity was present throughout the curriculum, through material on white privilege, racial identity, racism and cultural competence, but I felt strongly that a required course would allow students the opportunity to engage with the material in a deeper and more transformative way.

Despite my excitement about joining the university, I found myself on completely new ground. I was suddenly in a new cultural and academic setting, in a small town that was very different than Austin, in size and demographics. Austin is a city and has relatively large South Asian, Vietnamese and Chinese populations in addition to the White, Hispanic and African-American populations. In contrast, the town where my university is located reflects Texas statewide demographics, with a student population composed primarily of White and Hispanic women, and a small population of African-American women, from rural and semi-urban areas. I knew nothing about Southwestern Hispanic culture: coming from New York I had been exposed to Puerto Rican and Dominican Latino culture and I didn't know that the term Hispanic was still embraced.

I coped with this new environment by seeking out faculty and administrators within and outside of my department who shared my worldview and commitment to anti-racism. I was fortunate to find and meet the Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and Director of Multicultural Student Affairs, just as she was embarking on the development of a university-wide, multi-racial anti-racism peer educator group called Interruptions. We worked together, with a graduate student, in creating the vision and initial training sessions for the student organization.

I found that students had a very strong sense of themselves as Texans and Christians, regardless of their ethnic/racial identities. Many of the students grew up in small towns with a strong sense of community, and with very little or no exposure to people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, political or religious traditions and perspectives. There is, however, a large amount of diversity in socio-economic and life experiences because

it is a public university with a significant commuter-student population. To me, Loretta represented the general student body and the enormous chasm I perceived between our realities and life experiences. When I met Loretta, I was unsure of how we might bridge the chasm.

LL: My family, at least the ones I spent the most time with and identify the most with, has been in Texas for six generations. While my father traveled all over the world through the military, he had small-town white Southern values. I grew up firing bb guns and using my own machete to explore land we lived on when I was only six or seven years old. We listened to country music and attended church most Sundays.

I was around mostly white people for the first 11 years of my life. I never really thought about race, although I had heard racial slurs and had been coached to dislike certain racial groups by my stepmother. The first boy I liked was African-American and when word got back to my parents that their daughter liked a black boy, I was given severe physical punishment and forced to speak to a few relatives about why we did not participate in interracial relationships. On the other hand, I was coached to treat all people equally and that everyone counts. Despite the physical punishment, it did not change my feelings for the boy; it just made me not ever speak to him again. That was the point, I suppose.

By my 18th birthday I had moved 16 times and lived with more than six families. These experiences gave me exposure to people from different racial, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. I believed I was diverse, because I had African-American and Hispanic friends and I attend a multiracial church. The first time Dr. D. suggested I take the course, I dismissed the idea because I felt I did not need such a course and as far as I was concerned racism was not an issue for me.

In contrast to Loretta, race, ethnicity, and difference have been constant themes in my life. I grew up in a small upper-middle-class white town in Massachusetts. My father traveled internationally for his work--primarily

in the Middle East and South America--and before we moved to Massachusetts, we lived in Mexico and Algeria for a few years. I have six siblings, and five of us are adopted; together, we represent most of the traditional U.S. racial categories; White, Black, Hispanic and Asian/Pacific-Islander. I am biracial, of Asian North Indian and Scots-Irish descent, married to a first-generation South Indian, and I have spent extensive amounts of time in North and South India. As an adult, I met both of my biological parents and my extended families in West Virginia and India, and developed long-term relationships with all of them.

Due to my childhood experiences and adult connections with friends and family in India and New York, I have a globalized view of the world that is influenced by my multiple social locations. I identify myself racially as South Asian, but I am often assumed to be white and thus benefit from white privilege. I benefit from many other privileges as well, including class, ability, heterosexuality, educational access, and First World location. In the US, people have a hard time placing me racially and ethnically and either ask me where I am from or fit me into a category that makes sense to them based on their experiences: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Jewish, Italian, Spanish, Middle Eastern, Indian, American Indian, Pakistani, Nepali, Italian, Brazilian, or Portuguese. In South Asian contexts, I benefit from having light skin color and being of North Indian upper-caste descent. These contradictory experiences and my interpretations of them are embedded in the Diversity and Social Justice syllabus I developed almost 12 years ago, refining it every year based on new insights from my students, life experiences and research.

On campus, I noticed few African-American students and virtually no Asian-American students, staff or faculty. I felt like a foreigner, something I never experienced living and teaching in New York City. I had no reference point for their life experiences, as they did not for mine; we were foreign to each other. The recognition that we were foreign to each other was a central component of how I coped with this new student environment. I found an exciting challenge to find a common

ground of mutual discovery through our differences, not in spite of them. This is part of what I emphasize in the Diversity and Social Justice elective. Inspired by the writing of Audre Lorde (1984). I use one of her quotes in the beginning of the syllabus to frame the purpose of the course:

You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness (p. 142).

As a new faculty member and as a regional and racial outsider, my goal was to find a way to understand and reach the students by acknowledging our differences 'at the same time as we recognize our sameness'. As a social justice educator, my additional goal was to help the students, who may not yet realize it, that 'our wars are the same' and that we must commit ourselves to a future that includes each other.

Teaching Diversity and Social Justice provided me with the unique experience of getting to know students' life histories and understandings of the world in a way that is not possible in most courses, and this enabled me to honor and understand the strengths of the individual students. Embarking on this journey with openness and curiosity was one of the strategies I used to bond with Loretta and the other students. The second strategy I used to join with students was to embrace their world of technology, which was new to me. I used YouTube videos of music, documentaries, stand-up comedy, and poetry, to illustrate concepts such as racism, xenophobia, and resilience and invited students to share their favorite YouTube videos on relevant topics with the entire class when possible.

One of the things I learned from my students is that I benefit from Northeastern urban regional privilege. Since moving to Texas I have become keenly aware of this

privilege through hearing the perceptions that some of my Northeastern family members, friends and former colleagues have about Texans (and Southerners) as universally uneducated, homophobic, conservative and racist. Faculty and new friends born and raised in Texas shared their negative experiences with people from the Northeast based on these stereotypes. I also started to see the ways in which media and popular discourse reinforces these stereotypes and focuses primarily on East and West Coast urban and upper middle-class representations of family and individual experiences.

In the course, students write a paper on their ethnic roots, keep a journal of their reflections on the course and readings, and are provided with multiple opportunities to share aspects of their life experience with their classmates. As a feminist instructor, I share my own stories and experiences with the students with the purpose of modeling sharing and to communicate my own very different life experiences. This type of exchange is rich and rewarding and enables a connection through difference, rather than in spite of it.

Would you like Green Eggs and Ham?

The title of this article captures one of the most powerful themes in the story, without which Loretta and I believe that her transformation process would not have occurred. Would You Like Green Eggs and Ham refers to the iconic children's book by Dr. Seuss (1960) of the same name where the character, Sam-I-Am offers green eggs and ham to another character repeatedly, in many different ways, throughout the story, with the final outcome being that the character tries them and likes them. It was my idea to use this title after our many conversations and reflections together; as a mother of young children I have a recent history with the book.

In this narrative, a core component of Loretta's journey was the power of multiple, repeated opportunities for learning about social justice through on-campus opportunities, the curriculum, and individual advising sessions in which I would frequently ask her to consider taking the Diversity and Social Justice elective. Loretta's sense of social justice was always a

guiding force in her life, but her repeated exposure to new sources of information about racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression shaped her journey profoundly.

LL: After exploring these topics and looking back, I could see racism woven into so many situations of my life, and my view was just simply wrong due to a lack of exploring racism in relation to my own world. I did not believe I was racist. I had African American and Hispanic friends and associates, thus I was not racist. People complaining about racism just didn't want to do what it takes to make it in the good old USA. If it were not for the many opportunities the university provided for evaluating racism, I seriously doubt I would have ever explored racism, sexism, homophobia or other forms of oppression.

When I initially met Loretta, I saw her as an insider. She seemed to be someone that other students turned to for advice and tips for self-advocacy within the program. I had a feeling that if Loretta took the Diversity and Social Justice elective she would like it and her endorsement would help students identify it as a valuable learning opportunity and see that I was an instructor who, although very different than the student population, had something important to offer. I only remember suggesting to Loretta once that she consider taking the course, as I was anxious not to push the course on her when she really didn't want to take it. Loretta, however, remembers clearly that I repeatedly suggested that she consider taking the course. I do remember feeling cautious about being overly enthusiastic in recommending the course, as I was concerned that this could be a barrier to building a relationship and that I would be risking my reputation with the students—seen as a pushy, arrogant, and privileged New Yorker. Apparently, I was persistent despite this concern.

In addition to my multiple offerings of green eggs and ham, Loretta was being offered the same dish through assignments in social work classes, university events that came with

extra credit, and university-wide learning opportunities and student organizations.

LL: In my first semester, I attended a seminar for extra credit called "Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible". I decided to attend because I believed that discussions of white privilege were just about bashing white people. I was going to stand up and defend my race and culture. I was colorblind and I took people for who they are and I believed that higher education needed to recognize this. I wanted validation and like the minorities fight for their races, I was fighting for mine. So I attended, ready to challenge anything that sounded like white-bashing or reverse racism. In the seminar, the presenter showed a film based on the famous Peggy McIntosh (1989) article, Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. After viewing the film I decided to put my environment to the test: was I privileged above my Hispanic and African-American brothers and sisters based on the color of my skin? Within two weeks I realized that the answer to that question was yes.

I went back for another meeting with Dr. D. about the spring advising. I remember telling her that I supported Barack Obama and asked if she heard his speech about racism. He inspired me and I wanted her to know that I was open to minority leadership at the highest level. I started talking about racism since I realized it really does exist. I remember saying then that blacks and Hispanics can be just as racist as whites and racism goes both ways. I told her that we all have to come together as one people and get along to overcome racism. She did not acknowledge or affirm what I was saying. I remember feeling strongly and passionately about what I was saying and I told her it was not my fault racism existed and what was I supposed to do? She replied that racism is all of our faults. We all participate to some degree. I could at least subscribe to that idea. Again, she encouraged me to take the course, and again I politely declined.

I remember sitting in that meeting, knowing that Loretta wanted to be validated, and knowing that I could not do that. I knew it was a much longer and complicated discussion and process that I very much wanted her to have within the context of the course with the benefit of readings, classroom discussion and reflection that it offers. I felt nervous about jeopardizing the relationship with her, but I could not validate her in the way she wanted.

Credibility Gained Through Local Knowledge

The next theme we discovered was credibility gained through local knowledge. The multiple offerings of social justice education allowed Loretta the opportunity to independently research statistical and narrative data on the consequences of racism and homophobia on targeted groups, thus giving the issues more credibility than simply hearing about it in a lecture or reading it in a book.

Some of the other opportunities for credibility gained through local knowledge were through class exercises within the Diversity and Social Justice Class; one on stereotypes, classroom activities in which there were opportunities to experience other students' life experiences around issues of race and sexuality, and a group project that required research on YouTube to learn about African American LGBTQ experiences. As an advisor and instructor I gained personal credibility with Loretta through my commitment to anti-racism issues through my role as faculty advisor and trainer for Interruptions, the student organization that Loretta joined.

LL: An assignment in one of my classes that had a big impact on me was a take home essay test that included the question, "If you were a black male, what would be your future in today's American society, using statistical data? Discuss at least three domains." As I gathered statistical data concerning number of African Americans that attend college and graduate, incarceration rates and levels of unemployment, I found that in every domain huge disparities existed for African American males.

This really made me think about racism even more. We are not walking on the same path; we do not even have the same chances in the land of opportunity. It made me question everything about my upbringing, my culture, my previous work experience, everything. I was very mixed up about everything. My knowledge was growing.

I had another meeting with Dr. D. for the fall 2009 registration. I already thought that she did not like me. During this meeting with Dr. D. she mentioned the elective again for the following spring. I did not want to take a white-bashing class and I told her so. She said it was not a white-bashing class and I did not have to take it, but it would help me understand some of what I had questions about. Again, I declined. I really felt defensive about the subject; looking back I believe I was avoiding confronting the issue for myself. On one hand I could see the examples, on the other hand I did not want to be identified as racist, and I was certainly not going to a white-bashing class. I wanted to learn more, but I was not going to listen to anyone tell me how all white people are when they have not had MY EXPERIENCE, MY JOURNEY, MY INFLUENCES. I would not be categorized like white bread and agree that whites are bad, are the sole cause of racial problems etc.

I was horrified that Loretta had characterized the course as "white-bashing". I was teaching it that semester and I was sure that the rumor about it being a "White-bashing" course had started with the previous instructor. As we were discussing this article, Loretta revealed that it was someone in the class I taught who had identified the course in that way, as she was taking it. I do remember that student, as she did write that in one of her initial journal entries. I welcome that sort of brutally honest reflection because I see it as a sign of true engagement in the material. As that student went through the course, though, she came to embrace the content and in a much later journal entry articulated that she now understood that people were angry about the system of racism and the privileges it bestows, rather than being angry at individual white

people. Despite Loretta's refusal to take the course, she was clearly grappling with the issues.

LL: The following fall, we read a book in a policy class called Amazing Grace by Jonathan Kozol (1995). In it, the children were praying for God not to hate them because they were black. This book made me cry and think. In a study group for the class, one female student had asked why they were praying to not be black. I just went off like a rocket about everything, about the white privilege seminar, about the examples I learned about, about the statistical data from my other policy class. It was the first time that I had spoken up to other white people other than my husband, mother-in-law, and best friend. The girl was shocked. The room was quiet.

Later that semester, one of the students who had been in the room for the study group, asked me to go with her to hear Tim Wise, a white anti-racism activist, speak at a university-wide event sponsored by the Office of Student Multicultural Affairs. Seeing and hearing Tim Wise speak reinforced my own desires to fight racism, to stand up and say, 'this is how it is.' After the event we spoke about racism and our prejudices and she invited me to a meeting for a new multi-racial anti-racism peer-educator student group called Interruptions. I remember being so excited about this group and that there was somewhere to go to actively fight racism.

When I arrived at the meeting I was surprised to see Dr. D. Up until that evening I rejected the idea of her class. In the meeting she talked about the idea behind Interruptions: to learn about the history of racism, read different literature, become educated on how to be an ally and then educate peers on campus about racism. She mentioned that we would go over some of the same things in Interruptions as her class does. That is when I decided that I needed to take this class-- I wanted to learn more.

It was a pleasant surprise to see Loretta at Interruptions and in my class. Her participation in Interruptions and the course had such an

impact on the group experience in both settings, because of her honesty and willingness to take risks. I knew that other students were shocked by some of the things she said, but I also knew that she was expressing questions and reactions felt by many other students who were hesitant to volunteer their thoughts and feelings. Her ability to engage with the material in such a deep, honest, and public way enhanced the learning experiences of everyone. The fact that I was engaging in this work outside the classroom made me more credible to Loretta, and this credibility came from local knowledge, through her decision to join Interruptions. Many of the learning opportunities in the Diversity and Social Justice class also provided credibility to the issues through local knowledge via class assignments and exercises.

LL: One important activity for me that really began to shift my views, from my heart, was the activity of identifying stereotypes. We broke into groups and went around and wrote one-word descriptions as a group that was associated with a particular group such as homosexuals, African-Americans, Hispanics, and whites. I was stunned as I looked around and read the posters that we ALL in each group had such similar stereotypes. How can all of us, from more than six different races and backgrounds, representing more than four religions, all come up with the same stereotypes for all the groups? Really? This is a senior level course, we have all been taught to critically think and yet, we all shared similar biases. After that activity we sat down in different groups and discussed and shared parts of ourselves of which we were most proud. The two girls I was with were Hispanic and they were most proud of being Hispanic. What? This blew my mind. I was most proud of being a social work student, a good mom, a good wife and loyal friend. It never occurred to me that I should be proud of my skin color. I could not imagine saying that, much less

feeling that. It was as though a coin dropped in the machine of my brain. I realized, immediately, that this is a perfect illustration of my privilege as a White member of society. It was one of those "wow" moments.

Shortly after this, Dr. D. mentioned a book called *Silent Racism* (2006) in class. The author, Dr. Trepagnier, is a white upper-middle class professor at our university. She wrote this book and I thought I would look into it. After reading it, I was able to really grasp the ideas of race in a way that made sense to me. She posits that racism should not be measured as a 'you are or are not' but rather, on a scale. At one end of the scale is less racist, on the other end of the scale is more racist. This is how I came to identify my own racism. I realized that my ideas about humanity being one and that we are all in it together matter and still apply, but because of our society's dominant cultural heritage I understood that naturally I have some racism inside me. Maybe not toward individuals by any means, but more as a way things are done; as part of an entire societal machine.

One of the opportunities I provide to the class in terms of discovering local knowledge is a group assignment in which students are asked to immerse themselves in an assigned cultural group in order to make a diversity/social justice presentation to an imaginary agency. In this scenario, a new population is moving into the town of the social service agency and the team has been sent in to educate the agency about this population. They are asked to make a 30-minute presentation in which they must involve the audience in some way and address the following topics; 1) key issues and concerns of the population group, 2) history and current day consequences of oppression for this group, 3) how the group is represented by the dominant culture, 4) conflict and cohesion within the group, 5) resistance and resiliency within the group, and, 6) recommendations to the agency, using a social justice perspective, how service delivery, assessment and interventions should be influenced by the knowledge presented.

I ask students to list the top three groups they have the most interest in and

the least knowledge of, and then I group the students with the primary purpose of creating diverse learning and secondary purpose of accommodating their learning interests. I also complicate the identities that students select, in the sense that students often choose racial or ethnic groups without thinking about sexuality or gender. Because many students have been raised in religious communities where they have been taught that the practice of same-sex love is a sin, I often complicate the identities by including GLBTQ to the racial or ethnic groups they have selected. I ask them to immerse themselves in the selected population by finding and sharing traditional and non-traditional sources of knowledge including academic articles, comedy, music, artistic expression, and YouTube.

LL: Another requirement of this course was that we research a minority group. I got African American GLBTQ's. I thought I had been given the worst luck of all. I had zero interest in the topic and I have had little, if any direct experience and knowledge about the topic. However, for my part of this group project I had to find instances of hate crimes against this group. Once I began the research, I was shocked. I started researching personal stories of their lives and their murders. Many died brutally, tortured for their sexual orientation. Some had children, some in monogamous relationships with their partners, some still children 15-17 years of age. I was horrified and emotionally upset about this. What I really found most repugnant was that those in power, charged with delivering justice, often abused and misused their power and stoked hatred against African American GLBTQs. Police beat one woman in the face with handcuffs; one judge sentenced two teens to 15 years for murder because they 'only' killed 2 homosexuals. Since they killed two homosexuals, the sentence should be more lenient? I was quite troubled. This research was in stark contrast to what I believe the positions of judge and policeman should be. What is worse is that the policemen and judges typically are not charged with any crime.

When students are asked to find research on institutionalized homophobia, heterosexism and transphobia through these

group assignments, the information they find challenges their sense of justice. For students who have been taught in their religious communities that same sex relationships are sinful, it creates cognitive dissonance. There are also students who come from these communities and reject the ideas they have been exposed to, and/or are GLBTQ or GLBTQ allies. For students that have more knowledge of GLBTQ issues, the exercise is still beneficial, in that they are asked to delve into the intersections of sexuality, race and gender.

By creating a safe space in the class for all students, I made a conscious commitment to address the beliefs that I suspected some of my students held. In my first semester I had a student who was gifted academically, a sensitive thinker who I could imagine moving on to get her PhD eventually. During the course we entered into a challenging arena. It turned out that she believed in the bible literally and felt that 'homosexuality' when practiced, was a sin. She felt strongly that she could not work with someone grappling with his or her sexuality because she could not present a non-heterosexual choice as positive. In fact, she would feel that she was facilitating the imaginary client in sinning, should she present same-sex love as a positive option. I do not see this as a Texan-Christian position, as I had run into students in New York who held similar positions. Remembering this incident vividly, and aware that I had Christian GLBTQ students in the class, I made a decision to use an empowerment approach to the issue and learn from their local knowledge. That is, I did not want to make an assumption that all Christians or all Texan-Christians subscribed to the same belief but I wanted to create a safe space for everything to be said in a way that would be respectful and result in learning.

I had students read an article on gay affirmative practice that included powerful statistics on homelessness, and attempted and successful suicide rates of GLBTQ youth and adults. I asked them to help me understand the views of the previously mentioned student. I posed the question as a regional and religious outsider, asking how that could be an ethical stance, and what they might tell that same

student. Through the discussion, students helped me understand the variety of ways they would use their faith to guide them. Some students felt that their faith and relationship to God taught them to love everyone, and that they would be able to affirm the identities of GLBTQ population easily. Other students said that God would prefer them to support the imaginary client by affirming their sexuality than have the imaginary client commit suicide. Loretta ran with the discussion and said what many students may have been taught through their religious education.

LL: One thing I struggled with is [figuring out] issue concerning my Christianity as an individual and what the church as an institution believes. This discussion came up about why Christians believe it is wrong? Having been raised in church and been a member of church for many years I felt I could speak to that. The Bible talks about it being an abomination to God in Leviticus. I was simply stating why Christians believe it is wrong, as it is in the Word. I neither agreed nor disagreed. However, a girl in the class who had been riding with 3 of us that carpool to her car every night burst into tears and said she could not help the way she was, she liked women, she was in a committed relationship and she did not care what it said. I felt so bad for her that what I said affected her. I do not want to make people cry and get upset. I support everyone following their own heart and if that leads them to a same sex relationship it is their business. However, this incident highlighted for me the impact of religion on individuals.

I have discovered that there are very few non-Christians in rural, small-town and semi-urban Texas. The exposure students have had to different ways of thinking has sometimes been limited, but they seem hungry and enthusiastic for opportunities to learn about the different realities they have not been exposed to. Journals provide a safe space for exploring some of these issues.

Safe Space for Reflection

After Loretta found the local knowledge she was experiencing to be credible, she decided to take the course and to fully engage in the learning opportunities. Within the course, and within the advisor-advisee relationship we had developed over time, the dominant theme was of safe spaces for reflection. These spaces were made safe through rules made by the class for discussion, a personal space through the journal to freely share her journey with me and through my availability as professor and advisor. Loretta also found safe spaces with peers and selected family members through her involvement in Interruptions and through seeking out allies in her family.

LL: The class included journaling and I love to write. I really felt I could openly discuss things in the journal and she would make comments and we got to know each other through that and through interactions in class. We had all kinds of hot discussions in this class and the reading was great. Through the class I realized that just because I had socialized with, and been in the lives of many minorities, homosexuals and other 'diverse' groups, I was not as diverse as I thought. Journaling about the articles made me realize how much white supremacist ideas were passed onto me and woven into my personal history. The class also helped me realize how to interrupt racism, sexism and more. Sometimes just saying nothing interrupts it. Many of my white friends and family that I have openly discussed the issues with are defensive--exactly as I was. One of the things that came up in the white privilege seminar, Interruptions and in Dr. D.'s class was the duty of white people who realized how things really are to educate other white people. How would I do this? I was already talking to everyone who would give me the time of day. My mother-in-law and I had a discussion about privilege and racism. She was 84 at the time, and she said that the poor minorities

have always had it rough in this country, Whites have always had the privilege and she was the ONLY ONE in my intimate circle that encouraged me to do anything and everything to fight against racism and encouraged me to find a way to take up the issue. I told her about educating other white people and how many just reacted like I was crazy; too liberal or they just did not care. She said if I really care about it to find a way.

The support that Loretta found from her mother-in-law, peers, and myself, enabled her to move to the next step of action. There were many times that Loretta sought me out during my office hours to talk about specific readings and other course content that she found disturbing or troubling and wanted to process. She also used the journal as a central space to process her reflections on the content and her reactions to it. I collect the journals at four different points in the semester and provide extensive feedback so it can mirror a private conversation. The safe spaces that Loretta found through the course, our relationship, her peers and friends, facilitated her opportunities for deep reflection. This supported deep reflection was a central to Loretta's personal transformation.

From Reflection to Action

Loretta's leadership qualities have always been outstanding, demonstrated institutionally through her election as president of the Organization of Student Social Workers in her senior year. The summer before her election, she had an interaction with a student from her cohort that led her to identify the lack of a required course to be a problem.

LL: The summer after I completed Diversity and Social Justice I took a course in which I was among members of my cohort with whom I had gone through many social work classes. I struck up a friendship with a sorority member. Some of the discussion in Interruptions talked about sororities on campus being mostly open to whites only. After a few discussions, I asked her about the sorority's policy

on diversity. She said they had one black girl and she was their prize. I remember thinking, "their prize?" She represented the sorority's proof of diversity. I told her I could never be a part of a group that did not include all people. She said the sorority didn't have to "do that crap." The conversation continued and I was left disturbed and full of consternation. If she felt that way how many other social work students felt the same way? I had already run into dirty looks from talking about privilege and racism as 'the way it is' in classes, but I had not considered how many people were graduating with degrees in social work. According to our professional association, "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW Preamble, 2008). All my social work studies repeatedly showed the majority of those in poverty, that were oppressed, made the least money, had the least education and the highest arrest and incarceration rates were minorities. This girl was going to graduate never understanding her privilege and the oppression of the groups she, as a social worker would serve! This is when I identified this as a problem.

Had the faculty at my institution been aware of what Loretta's fellow student said, they would have been shocked and would have addressed this particular student's racist attitude. The larger problem that Loretta identified, however, was one that I believed existed in every program where I have taught. She identified the problem as the need for social work students to graduate with an understating of their own privilege and the oppression of the groups she, as a social worker would serve. The solution to this problem was making an appropriate course required for all students.

Loretta then came to me to discuss her idea of petitioning the school to make Diversity and Social Justice in Social Work a required course in the BSW program. She worked with me and other faculty members to create a statement for her petition, using skills she had learned in her macro practice course of how to create a successful change project. Many students supported the idea and Loretta organized a petition for students to sign, and brought it to classes. She found wide student support for the proposal. She also identified faculty members from the BSW Committee who would eventually make the final decision, and she and other students lobbied them before presenting their case to the committee. We worked together on strategy and finding ways to use her passion in a way that would be professional and work for her in making the change happen.

The biggest barrier to the passage of the proposal was the issue of finding space in the curriculum due to the large number of required courses in the BSW program; adding another required course would mean replacing one of the other core courses. Faculty supported the idea of adding the diversity course, especially since it was a student initiative, but the initial suggestion of students to replace the professionalism course with diversity was not embraced by the faculty. Being strategic in accomplishing the change meant that Loretta and other students restrain their enthusiasm in suggesting that professionalism be cut to make room for Diversity and Social Justice and instead let the BSW Committee make that decision.

LL: Thanks to Dr. D. helping guide me through understanding the experiences of minorities in her class and in Interruptions, her tireless assistance and counsel with me about the proposal, and her much needed coaching on being professional, strategic and suggesting this change in a way to help ensure a positive outcome, I am pleased to say that Dixie, [a friend and fellow student leader from Interruptions], presented our proposal to the faculty members at the end of the fall 2009 semester.

If Dr. D. had not been my advisor, professor and someone thoroughly educated on these topics, this transformative change in my thinking may not have happened. We were different from day one, but through her reminders of the class, her extra service to this issue through *Interruptions* and her willingness to see me through an extra task of making the presentation, we may one day in the near future be educating Texas social workers on the experience of non-dominant groups. I say that our differences brought us together and allowed us to work on something we both believe.

Loretta's active commitment to exploring and discussing the issues of white privilege and institutionalized racism, plus her strong internal sense of social justice, led her to take action to change the curriculum in the BSW program. This exploration was supported and facilitated by the multiple opportunities for social justice education offered through university activities such as Tim Wise and the university-sponsored student group, *Interruptions*, the social work curriculum, and through my persistence in recommending the course. The credibility gained through local knowledge was possible through Loretta's openness to it, and availability through exposure to local knowledge through assignments, class exercises, and discussions. My credibility was achieved through demonstrating my commitment to the issues outside of the classroom. The safe spaces for reflection were crucial in the process. As we discussed our observations of the green eggs and ham effect, we agreed that our social work program itself does a great job in infusing diversity and social justice content, and that this is supported by the university. We also saw that making Diversity and Social Justice a required course was crucial, because of the safe space for reflection it gives students through the journal and through the assignments and class activities.

Our mutual passion for justice was a primary force in our individual and collaborative journeys, and was a key factor in our ability to forge a relationship in which we could recognize and honor our differences. We first met in 2007, and the course has

become required starting fall 2011. Loretta has graduated and we have kept in touch to write this article. and we plan to collaborate on other projects in the future.

Lessons Learned as a Social Work Educator

The transformation I have experienced as a teacher through my experiences with Loretta and my ongoing work in the institution is profound. As an educator and faculty member I have learned to identify and embrace contradictions with the belief that everyone, including myself, is a work in progress. This is something that I have explored intellectually and personally, but it was not until this experience that I internalized it and integrated it into my understanding of teaching, culture and community.

As a social justice educator, I know that people coming from socially and politically liberal communities can be racist and homophobic, although the expression of these feelings may be quiet. In New York city, many students fell into this category, but they were often harder to reach because they would edit their opinions in order to fit in to the social norms of politically correct language and attitudes, or they felt it was unnecessary for them to learn about. In this institutional context, where students come from more socially and politically conservative communities, there is less embarrassment about sharing their views and earnestly engaging in a process of self-discovery. I believe that type of honesty facilitates deeper transformations. I cannot imagine a white social work student in New York City saying that they would not take a Diversity and Social Justice course because it was "white-bashing", even if they actually felt that way. At the same time, many students in both programs in New York regarded the diversity elective as irrelevant to their professional development. In one program the elective was eventually cancelled because not enough students registered for it.

I continue to struggle with how to address some of the heterosexual students' beliefs about what it means to be GLBTQ in relation to their religious beliefs. I have tried a variety of approaches, and will continue to do so,

keeping in mind the importance of multiple institutional messages. These multiple institutional messages are sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. Through a program supported by this office, faculty, students, and staff can attend trainings on how to be an ally to GLBTQ individuals, and take advantage of the many guest lectures and learning opportunities offered.

I have also facilitated and witnessed profound movements, as I see in Loretta's journey with race awareness and starting on the path of becoming a GLBTQ ally. I have seen many students reaching out for knowledge and experiences that would challenge what they thought they knew in the past. As I watch this happen with every student who goes through the course, I am convinced that the social work profession needs to explicitly articulate a stance on GLBTQ affirmative practice, and how that can be accomplished with the sometimes competing requirement of religious tolerance. In my current location I feel comfortable in gently pushing the boundaries of knowledge and belief, but I am cognizant of working for the State of Texas, and the larger political environment of the state. When the profession can clearly articulate a position on these issues, myself and I other educators teaching in similar contexts will be empowered to take more risks in addressing these issues.

These are the contradictions that I have learned to see and embrace along with the firm belief that we are all works in progress. Through the experience with Loretta and my overall experiences teaching in Texas, I am learning that contradictions, when acknowledged and embraced, can provide unique and unexpected opportunities for personal and institutional transformation.

In my personal and intellectual journey, I discovered Gloria Anzaldúa, a biracial, Anglo-Mexican woman who grew up on the Texas-Mexico border. I use readings in the Diversity and Social Justice course from her groundbreaking work, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza =La Frontera* (1987). Her work, and this particular quote, has always been powerful for me intellectually and personally, but as I reflect on the lessons learned as an educator

through my experiences with Loretta at this university on this new cultural ground, it resonates powerfully:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else (Anzaldúa, 79).

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