

PART I

Birth of a Movement

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Paths to Social Justice

As North America and other Western countries become more culturally diverse, members of most professions are expected to develop greater sensitivity and responsiveness to persons of different backgrounds. Thus, one segment of college education in all majors and specialties is devoted to reducing *ethnocentrism*, that is, a limited view of the world based only on your own background. Depending on your race, ethnicity, religion, gender, geographic location, socioeconomic status, first language, age, sexual orientation, political convictions, and other such variables, you may perceive the world in ways that are quite at odds with those who have different experiences.

It may seem obvious that you can't learn greater cultural sensitivity by listening to a lecture or reading a book about the subject. Your experiences in this arena can best be enriched and expanded through some form of direct contact with other cultures and people of different backgrounds. That is one reason why college campuses work so hard to build a student body that represents as much diversity as possible. It is also why you are so passionately encouraged to educate yourself outside the classroom by becoming involved in some kind of cross-cultural experience. This could involve a semester abroad, an academic exchange, home-stays in different communities, participation in cultural events, service learning, or a volunteer project. In many of these options, the goal is twofold—you are furthering your own education at the same time you are helping to improve the plight of those less fortunate than yourself. Students who participate in such activities often report that they also develop skills that help

them to be more collaborative, flexible, caring, and sensitive to those who are different from themselves (Boyle, Nackerud, & Kilpatrick, 1999).

ALTRUISM: DOING GOOD FOR OTHERS—AND YOURSELF

Why do people willingly give away part of their time, not to mention their money, resources, and energy, to help others who are less fortunate? Why would students select service majors or helping professions that often result in lower financial payoffs than their friends who choose business?

The simple answer, of course, is that we devote ourselves to the path that offers us the greatest personal satisfaction and meaning. For some, this can involve the accumulation of maximum wealth; for others it means making a constructive difference in the world—being useful to others in greatest need.

Helping Now, or in the Future

It's been, I don't know, four years, but seems like a lifetime since I've been in college. Graduation is coming, and believe me, I can't wait, but I'm also freaked out by it all. I've got so much debt I might have to rob a 7-11 store. Just kidding! Anyway, I figure it'll take me at least 10 years to pay off what I owe, and that's if I'm careful. I figure that I'll just find a really high-paying job, make a boatload of money, and then someday I can contribute in an even bigger way later in life, like Oprah did or something. There is a part of me that really does want to go travel the world and try to help people who aren't as lucky as I am. I guess I could defer my loans for a few years, since there are programs out there that do that, but the debt would still be waiting for me when I returned. I may as well just get to work now. It sounds hopeless, but do I have another choice?

Altruism refers to behavior that is “other-focused.” It represents benevolent, charitable actions that are not motivated by personal gain or the expectation of reciprocal favors (Post, 2007). This sort of selfless giving is done without major consideration as to how it will pay off in the future. Compare, for example, a student who volunteers to work for a public agency to beef up a resume to one who has no ulterior motive other than to be helpful. Consider the difference between someone who works for Make a Wish Foundation to help relieve the

suffering of children versus one who thinks it will look good on graduate school applications. We are not saying that good and noble behavior cannot be combined with furthering one's own interests; we are suggesting that “pure” altruism has no personal agenda.

Regardless of whether you are interested in service to build your own career options or out of genuine interest in being useful to others, the effects can often be the same. When people are *really* honest with themselves, they will often admit that there are clear payoffs to them of a very personal nature.

- They feel like their lives are redeemed. They are doing something that seems like it matters.
- They are giving their lives greater meaning. Many have left high-paying jobs because they felt empty.
- They are paying back what others have given to them. They have been wounded or hurt earlier in life and recovered sufficiently to want to ease others suffering.
- They are following a spiritual path. This can be either self-serving (a ticket to heaven) or following divine inspiration.
- They are developing new areas of expertise and gaining valuable experience. This can range from beefing up one's resume to developing skills that will be useful in the future.
- They are hiding from things they wish to avoid. Helping others is a good distraction from dealing with issues that may be painful, or avoiding problems that feel overwhelming.
- They can feel like martyrs, making sacrifices and suffering deprivations for the greater good.
- They are feeling useful. Their sense of self-worth and importance can be directly related to the impact they believe they're having on others.

When Greg Mortenson was asked what motivated him to work so tirelessly building schools in remote areas of Central Asia, he didn't hesitate for a second: “The answer is simple: when I look in the eyes of the children in Pakistan and Afghanistan, I see the eyes of my own children full of wonder—and hope that we each do our part to leave them a legacy of peace instead

What I'm Meant to Do

School frustrates me. When I was a kid everyone said I had Attention Deficit Disorder, which I wish I did because then I would at least have an excuse. I just get so damn bored when I'm sitting in class! The idea of sitting in a desk job for the rest of my life scares the crap out of me. I need to find something active where I can be moving around all the time. Just because I'm not like everyone else doesn't mean I'm any less than them. And I do have a big urge to help others. I think a job in some kind of international aid work would be perfect for me. Sometimes I get worried that I'm not smart enough to help other people, but then I realize that I really can make a difference, even if I'm not a rocket scientist or something like that. I went to Africa last year on a weeklong trip to build schools, and it was amazing! I wasn't bored once, and I was really changing these people's lives! I know now that this is what I was meant to do. It may not be the most conventional path in life, but I love it and I'm going to go for it.

of the perpetual cycle of violence, war, terrorism, racism, exploitation, and bigotry that we have yet to conquer” (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 335).

Many of these motives play a part in our own work, but the last one is especially relevant to Jeffrey's story.

FIXING A HAND

The old man stumbled down the rocky slope grimacing in pain. He was holding his arm, bent at the elbow, with his hand upright as if in a perpetual greeting. In spite of his advanced age, he seemed far more nimble on his feet than I (Jeffrey) could ever hope to achieve. I had spent the past five hours laboring with heaving breaths up and down a yak trail deep in the Himalayas. This was the third week of a journey that had taken me to a half-dozen villages where I was organizing educational programs for neglected children.

Prior to the appearance of the old man, I had been trying to catch my breath while staring, spellbound, at five of the highest mountain peaks in the world.

I was debating whether I had the energy to pull out my camera for another quick shot when the Sherpa who was acting as a guide rushed up to me.

"Sir," he said to me, "you help man." This was not a question but rather a direct order. It was all the more remarkable because the guide was usually so deferential, if not obsequious.

I approached the old man cautiously, not exactly sure what was expected of me, nor how I was supposed to help him. Once I got closer, I could see more closely his swollen hand that was so covered with blisters it looked like a balloon about to burst. There were white, pus-filled sores running along his fingers and palm, almost as if there were caterpillars crawling underneath his skin.

The old man was a dignified gentleman, dressed in a white shirt, vest, and tights, a long knife at his side. He was an impressive figure, all the more so because although his hand was grossly disfigured, he was obviously under great control of the crippling pain.

"You help him," the Sherpa said again, pointing to the old man's hand.

The old man looked at me and managed a smile between his tight lips. He held out his hand as if it was a foreign object that belonged to someone else. He turned it one way, then the other, displaying the network of bloated blisters that covered both sides.

"What happened?" I asked, partially out of curiosity, but also to stall for time before I could figure out what I was supposed to do. I was no doctor, at least not a real one. The last thing in the world this guy needed right now was a psychologist.

The old man and the Sherpa spoke for several minutes before it was announced with simple clarity: "Boiling water."

"He spilled boiling water on himself?" I asked. "Is that what happened?"

Both men nodded.

Because I was a foreigner, it was common for locals to believe that I possessed medical supplies and expertise that far exceeded their own meager resources. They were not far wrong, considering that the nearest medical facility was a two-day walk away. If this man did not receive help from me, he would most likely have to deal with this on his own.

I looked into my supplies and found a supply of gauze and antiseptic cream which I proceeded to apply to the blistered hand. No matter how delicately I spread the lotion I could hear the man's involuntary gasps. Adopting the manner

of the doctor that I was now pretending to be, I handed him aspirin to take for the pain. "Take two of these now, another two before you go to bed tonight." I felt myself stifling a nervous giggle once I realized I was reciting the line from some doctor show on television.

The old man looked at me with genuine gratitude, as if I had just saved his life, or at least his hand. He brought his hands up to his chin, forming the steeple gesture of respect in this part of the world. "*Namaste*," he said, then turned and headed back up the slope with his hand still held aloft.

I walked on for the rest of the day, up and down more mountains, through rice paddies and mustard fields, passing herds of water buffalo, troops of monkeys, mule trains, and porters on this Himalayan highway. All the major Annapurna peaks were visible throughout the day, draped in clouds. There was more scenery and stimulation than anyone could ever hope to encounter in a lifetime. Yet I couldn't get that old man and his hand out of my mind. I was haunted by that encounter, and I couldn't figure out why it had such a huge impact on me.

Then it came to me: I fixed something. At least, I think I did. Surely I hadn't done any harm in my brief foray as an emergency physician. Even if the aspirin and antiseptic didn't make much of a difference, I know—I am *certain*—that my words of reassurance soothed the man's pain.

I am someone who has no mechanical aptitude whatsoever. I can barely change the batteries in my camera and flashlight. I often break light bulbs while changing them. I am more than unusually proud that I can change a flat tire; in some ways, I look forward to those episodes, because in an hour I can fix something, make it better.

So it is that I chose a profession in which I am rarely sure that I ever really help anyone. Even when I do think I make a difference, I'm never quite certain whether the effects will really last, or even if my clients are just reporting imaginary progress. Most of the work I do, as a teacher or supervisor or clinician, takes many weeks, months, or even years, before I see substantial, visible changes.

Yet in about 15 minutes, I dressed the wound of someone in need and helped him to feel better. I have no idea, of course, what happened to the man after our paths diverged. Maybe he lost the use of his hand or even died of infection. But I'd like to think that, regardless of my rather simplistic attempt at practicing medicine without a license, I eased his suffering in ways that I long for every day with my clients and students. I know it isn't my job to make people feel

better but, rather, to help them to take better care of themselves and take greater charge of their own lives—even though this often means stirring up *more* pain. I suppose that also fits what happened when I caused more pain in the old man by cleaning and treating his wounds in order to prevent infection and aid healing.

There are times when I feel such despair at what it is that I try to do. Some of the people we all attempt to help have problems that are so long-standing, so chronic and unrelenting, so severe, that whatever we do seems like nothing but a token gesture. The kids leave the session and return to their gangs or abusive homes. Those with impulse disorders, hallucinations, personality disturbances, chronic drug abuse, major depression—the list goes on and on—sometimes seem impervious to the most powerful interventions. When some of our most challenging cases do show definite signs of progress, we are left to wonder how much of these changes will persist over time, especially with a return to dysfunctional environments, abject poverty, or crime-filled neighborhoods.

Just once in awhile it feels so glorious to fix someone or something—to *know* that I really helped someone. That this experience of fixing a hand took place during such a brief interval is even more of a gift. It is also a clear indication of my own need to feel useful, how my own sense of potency, as a person and a professional, comes from continually proving that I have not lost my power. With each new person I help, I wonder whether the magic has left me, whether I have anything left to give.

I am forced to confront the sense of powerlessness I have felt most of my life, the drive that has led me—pushed me—to be so overachieving, to prove myself again and again. I realize now that my interaction with the old man wasn't really about fixing his hand. He was the latest opportunity that I used to try and fix myself.

As I now relive this incident, I'm not certain the Sherpa begged me to help this old man as much as I jumped at the chance to do something useful for him. I needed this encounter. It had been more than a week on the trail in which people were taking care of me, rather than the configuration that I am used to—being responsible for taking care of others. Without such constant opportunities to be helpful, I feel like I am losing my way, even losing myself.

I tried to fix the old man's hand and felt a degree of satisfaction to an extent that I rarely experience in teaching or counseling. Partly, this resulted from the immediate feedback that my intervention was effective. But it was also because

my “client” would have had no other recourse if I had not been on the scene. It was as if I arrived at that exact time and place, in one of the most remote places in the world, specifically to do something useful.

I hardly have to travel halfway around the world to make a difference. It just feels like the magnitude and intensity of the experience was amplified by the novelty of what, with whom, and how it took place. It gets me thinking that I try to find my way by taking new, undiscovered paths that allow me to access new parts of myself. I only bandaged a wound, yet in so doing, I also healed myself.

In this book, you will read many other stories similar to mine, undertaken by fairly ordinary people (many of them students) who felt inspired to exercise their altruistic spirit and get involved in promoting social justice projects on a local or global scale. You will hear this theme repeated many times in your educational career, since it is currently a very hot trend to encourage, if not require, students to become involved in some type of service learning. It is reasoned that there is only so much you can learn in a classroom or in books—the wide world awaits you, with many challenges and opportunities.

WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE ANYWAY?

No, it isn’t a gathering of judges getting together for drinks and conversation, nor is it a particularly gregarious and fun-loving judge. It also does not refer to legal proceedings at a social function. With that said about what it is *not*, social justice is a bit difficult to clearly define. It is one of those terms that is thrown around all the time, variously referring to righting wrongs, taking a moral stand, or fighting against some perceived injustice. Some fringe groups also use the term to refer to any cause that promotes their radical vision of what is fair and right (Lum, 2007).

Within the context of the social or hard sciences, health, business, or any other profession, “social justice” is used often to describe altruistic efforts in some capacity, such as advocating on behalf of those without a voice or for greater equity. For instance, the tragedy that occurred on 9/11 with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon mobilized tremendous compassion for the families of the 5,000 people who died, yet 10 times that number of children die of starvation and malnutrition *every day*. During the hour or so that you spent reading this book, another 400 children died, most of whom could have been saved if they had access to health care and a nutritious food supply.

What Is Social Justice Anyway?

Eyes Closed Shut

I love warm water, hot sand, and beautiful women. I can't help it, it's my weakness. During spring break one year I came down here to Cancun with some friends, and never left. I got a job full time as a cabana boy for Club Med, and it's the best. I basically get paid to just be on vacation. I've been doing it for five years now, and for most of the time I've just stayed on the grounds of the resort. Last year I met a girl here who works in the restaurant. She's actually from the Yucatan, and grew up down the coast from here, just north of Belize. She's beautiful, not like anyone I've ever met, but she comes from this really poor background. I've been down to visit her family a few times, and it has just blown my mind to see how much poverty they're living in. They have food to eat and all that, but it's not exactly the cleanest, most sanitary living conditions. Everything stinks like sewage, and there are flies everywhere. The roof on their home isn't very good, and when it rains everyone gets wet. It's so weird driving from Club Med in Cancun down the Yucatan to visit them. I just can't believe the gap between the people at the resort and these people, and it's only a two-hour drive away. If the people at Club Med could even just put a little resources and effort and help, that entire village could be fixed up, but I don't even know if anyone knows of its existence. I think that is the way most of us live our lives—with our eyes closed to what's going on around us.

As multifaceted and broadly applied as the term might be, social justice generally can be described as having any of the following characteristics or actions (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006; Lee & Hipolito-Delgado, 2007):

1. *Challenging* systemic inequities within an organization or community. This involves first *recognizing* that some individuals or groups are marginalized in some way and then *doing something* to change the status quo.
2. *Transforming* social institutions. Once inequities are identified, steps are taken to change the ways that schools, agencies, government departments, and other organizations operate.
3. *Inviting* fuller access to resources and full participation on the part of excluded people. Again, this involves constructive *action* (rather than mere talk) to advocate on behalf of those without equal rights because of their

- race, age, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, education, socioeconomic status, or group membership.
4. *Bringing attention* to issues of oppression, prejudice, and social inequities within an organization or community.
 5. *Combating* racism, prejudice, homophobia, ageism, and sexism as it is witnessed. Speaking out and taking action in the face of injustices and oppression.
 6. *Advocating* on behalf of human rights, especially among those who have minority status or who have been historically denied privileges afforded to



Becoming involved in some type of social justice or service learning experience can be structured according to your own interests, passions, experience, goals, time availability, and resources. But it does take considerable initiative, personal sacrifice, and a degree of personal challenge to work in communities without the familiarity and comforts to which you have become accustomed.

What Is Social Justice Anyway?

those of the majority. For example, this could refer to Native Americans, African Americans, and other minorities within the United States, those of the “untouchable” caste in India, the Kurds of Iraq, the hill tribes of Cambodia, the Palestinians in the Middle East, and so on.

7. *Empowering* those who have historically been without a voice. This may involve personal self-sacrifice, as well as surrendering some of your own privileges and advantages.
8. *Volunteering time and devoting personal resources* to make a difference among those most in need. Whether this is with the homeless in your own community or with those most at-risk across the nation or abroad, you develop and implement strategies for making a difference.

Making Difficult Choices

I grew up in the Bronx. The boys in school never liked me, calling me “The Smart Girl,” and that gave me an edge. I didn’t like anyone, and no one really liked me, so I just kept to myself. I put all that aggression into studying, and at my school there wasn’t a lot of competition, so I was first in my class. My school counselor said that with my grades I could get into Harvard, because they were looking for “disadvantaged students” or something like that. Anyway, I applied, got in, and now it’s my fourth year here. I chose to study urban planning because there is a lot of math in that, and math has always been easy for me. When I graduate, I can pretty much get any job I want. Hell, I can even go to Beverly Hills in California and do urban planning for all the rich people. My family thinks I should come back to the Bronx and help our area to make it more suitable for living. Part of me wants to go home to help, but part of me thinks, “screw them!” The people in my neighborhood weren’t exactly helpful to me growing up, so why should I go back and help them now? My mother says “to whom much is given, much is expected,” or some crap like that. I know I have an amazing life in front of me, but I think if I moved to California my mother’s voice would always be ringing in the back of my head. I think I have to stay, and try to make a difference where I grew up.

When you combine all of these dimensions, what emerges is a vision of social justice in which professionals in a variety of fields act as advocates, activists, and leaders in the cause of promoting human freedom and equality. Regardless

of where you end up working, and what you end up doing for a living, there will be countless opportunities for you to stand up for the rights of those who are oppressed. For those of you who are more ambitious in this enterprise, there are also limitless possibilities for you to visit places where oppression, poverty, and injustice are the norm. This book tells the story of some such efforts on the part of individuals who are not that different from you.