

Disrupting the Luxury of Despair: Justice and Peace Education in Contexts of Relative Privilege

Katherine Turpin

Assistant Professor of Religious Education
Iiff School of Theology

Abstract:

The Iiff School of Theology established a Justice and Peace Program nearly fifteen years ago to respond to the challenges of racism, class and economic exploitation, sexism, and militarism through fostering social analysis and attending to the contributions of religious thought and resources to the struggles of social change. Within an institution and with a student body who both tend to be relatively privileged in terms of class and racial/ethnic background, one of the persistent issues in teaching justice and peace studies has been addressing the emergence of guilt, anger, and despair as students (and faculty) must relinquish self-understandings, historical understandings of their religious tradition and national context, and inadequate theological and faith formation shaped by dominant narratives that ignore social realities of oppression. Often, the response of students of relative privilege to this kind of education in a traditional academic environment takes the form of informed despair rather than the desired responses of increased agency to engage in movements for social change or increased leadership in building more just institutions. The longstanding presence of this program and its relationship to the core identity commitments of the institution have encouraged multiple professors to develop unique pedagogical approaches to educate students about justice issues in this context. Creative pedagogical response has taken many forms, including engaging oral history as a form of theological inquiry, increasing praxis-based forms of education, linking with community leaders as collaborators in the teaching environment, attending to arts and spiritual practice as expressions of resistance and resilience, exploring histories of resistance across the core curriculum, and nurturing smaller communities of commitment to social action within the broader institution. This paper will draw on insights of this community of practice in conversation with literature-based analysis to describe the temptations of students learning about justice and peace in contexts of privilege, pedagogical practices emerging in this particular context, and the failures and limitations of these practices for individual and institutional transformation.

Description of the Contextual Setting for this Reflection

Curricular Design

The Iiff School of Theology established a Justice and Peace Program¹ nearly fifteen years ago to respond to the challenges of racism, class and economic exploitation, sexism, and militarism through fostering social analysis and attending to the contributions of religious thought and resources to the struggles of social change. Although students may follow a course of study that leads to a concentration in justice and peace studies in either the MDiv or MASM (Master of Arts in Specialized Ministry) programs at Iiff, many students interact with the program in more tangential ways, through taking the occasional course or praxis experience, or attending the weekly “Justice and Pizza” lunch and speaker. The J & P concentration includes

¹ known locally and hereafter referred to in this paper as the “J & P Program”

three seminars: “Race, Gender, Class: A Systemic Analysis of Individual, Institutional, and Social Oppression,” “Theories and Methods in Justice and Peace Studies,” and “Justice and Peace Struggles: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives.” Students also must participate in at least one praxis seminar for each year of their program, and their field education requirements must be located in an agency related to justice and peace work.

In addition to specific J & P concentration courses, the school’s commitment to justice issues in faculty recruitment means that even required masters’ courses outside of the concentration often focus on justice-related issues. An example of this is the required course in church history: “Christianity in the Modern World: Colonialism and Christianities in the Americas, Asia, and Africa.” As evident in the course title, the course focuses on the impact of Christian missions on indigenous cultures and religions and the ways in which culture and Christianity were confused and mutually imposed through the modern mission movement. This way of telling the story of the modern church often deeply challenges the self, institutional, and historical understandings of students of European descent from the United States. In this way, most students at Iliff encounter justice-related education at some point in their academic careers.

Students

Students encountering educational opportunities in the J & P program can be identified in the following three categories:

- “True believers” These are students who often came to Iliff because of the J & P program. Many of them have significant kinds of experience in social justice work prior to coming to graduate school, or have at least begun to wrestle with some of the key issues in college coursework or other settings. Initially, the founders of the program anticipated that many persons engaged in social justice work as a profession might attend Iliff as a moment of pulling back and reflecting on their experiences before moving back into work. Although not as many of these vocationally committed persons have entered the program as anticipated, in recent years many entering students have come with experience in justice ministry and/or already engaged in self-reflection and critical analysis around justice issues.
- “Interested comers” Most students who attend Iliff have some awareness of its commitments within the J & P program whether or not it was their main reason for matriculating here. Because there is an alternative venue for theological education in the Denver metro region, students have made a choice to attend Iliff. Often these students may be naïve to or have limited exposure to justice issues in educational environments, but they are open to exploring J & P classes. While they often have a longer journey to walk in coming to terms with the issues, there are often “converts” out of this group who go on to live out significant vocational commitments in J & P work. Students without a lot of prior exposure to J & P studies sometimes get their feet wet and get excited about this whole new area of understanding and reflection.
- “Forced participants” Some students have come to Iliff without any particular affinity with the justice-orientation of the school, and may be particularly resistant to participating in core requirements that emphasize justice issues rather than what they would consider “normal” theological subjects. These students may grit their teeth and get through the required classes that touch on justice issues while dismissing them as politically motivated, unrelated to their work in ministry, and a waste of time.

Students can also be distinguished by the amount of learning about social structures of power and privilege that their contexts have caused them to engage prior to coming to Iliff. Students who come from class and racial backgrounds other than middle to owning class and Anglo often have engaged in some level of reflection on social constructs of privilege with regards to race and class. Faculty have remarked that students who have addressed analysis and action in one area of injustice in other settings (feminist/womanist critiques of patriarchy, for example) are often able to translate these learnings more quickly into other areas of analysis and action. Thus, the identity and social location of students also puts them in very different starting points as they study justice issues. While the developmental journey of all of these students as they engage in education around J & P issues deserves reflection, for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to focus primarily on the “interested comers” who come largely from more privileged class and race contexts.

What do I mean by a context of “relative privilege”? It is inadequate to talk about students as “privileged” as an essentialized element of their identity. Of course, most students have a variety of experiences, varied levels of access to power in various contexts, and complex identities that elicit different responses in different contexts. At the same time, one could say in broad strokes that Iliff is a historically-white institution populated primarily by students of relative class and racial/ethnic privilege. While in recent years the faculty and administration have become intentionally more diverse in racial/ethnic background, the student body consists largely of persons from “mainline” Protestant denominations in the predominantly-white Plains and Rocky Mountain States.² In addition, as a graduate and professional school, students must have completed an undergraduate education to enroll in Iliff. So, while students certainly struggle with financial issues and come from a variety of economic backgrounds, they all have secured one element to class privilege in the U.S., a college education, that offers certain options unavailable to others in the general population.

Many Iliff students come from social locations that afford them mixed experiences of privilege and oppression. More than sixty percent of the student body is comprised of women, who have often experienced individualized and institutionalized sexism in various contexts. Students of color and students from poor or working class backgrounds experience their limited access to power in different ways. In addition, Iliff has a significant GLBT student population who are preparing for work in church institutions that rarely affirm their ability to be leaders in ministry. Often because of their experiences of oppression both in the broader social context and in the very religious settings they feel called to serve, GLBT students are often attuned to social stratification of power in ways that their straight colleagues are not. Because of these variations in student experience, I have chosen to designate Iliff a context of “relative” privilege.

Faculty

In preparation for this paper I interviewed six colleagues who have taught regularly in the J & P program at Iliff: Dr. George E. “Tink” Tinker, Dr. Antony Alumkal, Dr. Rachel Harding, Dr. Dana Wilbanks, Dr. Loring Abeyta, and Rev. Gail Erisman Valeta. Additionally I interviewed one colleague, Dr. Miguel de la Torre, who taught about justice issues at his previous appointment at a private college that could also be understood as a context comprised

² For example, only 12% of the incoming masters students in 2005 claim racial/ethnic background other than white/Caucasian.

largely of privileged students.³ The interviewees included three women and four men, two Anglo persons and five persons of color. Four are full-time faculty members and three are adjunct faculty members teaching in the area of J & P.

Limits of a Graduate Academic Context

F.Nile Harper once wrote an article entitled “Social Power and the Limitations of Church Education”⁴ during the height of the movements for social change of the late sixties. One could substitute “graduate education” for “church education” in that title and explore the ways in which a graduate school setting inhibits education around justice issues. Graduate education itself is a luxury good in the United States context. William Kennedy writes about the difficulty of engaging justice education within the structures of formal institutions: “We live within the limits of our system, and if we become a serious challenge to educational or ecclesiastical control, and to the financial structures which support the institution and pay our salaries, we are soon in trouble. Even if we do not get fired [get bad teaching reviews, fail to receive tenure], the chances are that our successors will be expected to be less dangerous.”⁵ Professors are dependent upon strong teaching evaluations for tenure and promotion, and they tend to want students to evaluate their classes positively. Pushing students to face difficult truths does not often lead to warm, positive evaluations from students.⁶

In liberation models of pedagogy, establishing relationship and solidarity with persons suffering under the situations of injustice is understood to be a motivating factor for relatively privileged students to pursue knowledge about structures of power and pursue changes in these structures. This kind of relationship is difficult to achieve in an academic setting that is compromised by its location of relative privilege. Interestingly, at Iliff, hard conversation and solidarity can develop more easily on issues of heterosexism and sexism because of the makeup of our student body. Issues of racism and classism are more difficult to engage within the classroom because of the student population.

To a certain extent, graduate education is an artificial venture. Time in the classroom is limited by class period and term boundaries. Learning that is costly emotionally or personally requires ongoing commitment and supportive community that is difficult to engage within the confines of the academic schedule, particularly in a quarter system. Loring Abeyta, an adjunct instructor who regularly teaches the “Race, Gender, Class” class at Iliff, describes the experience of teaching this class within the quarter system as follows: “Student experience is a real roller coaster. They come to justice issues very enthusiastic, like a new school year with new books, notebooks, and pencils. By the middle of the quarter they are in crisis and they start crying, getting ill, fighting, and missing class. By the end of ten weeks they are just starting to come crawling up out of the hole.” The quarter system and higher education both create an artificial

³ All quotes from these seven individuals in this paper are taken from my notes of our interviews unless otherwise indicated. All seven gave permission for me to use their names and to credit their wisdom in this paper. Please do not cite them in further publications without first receiving their permission. While I could not have written this paper without drawing on their enormous wisdom and perspective on the practice of teaching about justice, I take responsibility for the characterizations and limitations of my conclusions drawn from their insight.

⁴ Harper, F. Nile. 1969. Social Power and the Limitations of Church Education. *Religious Education* 64(5): 390-398.

⁵ Kennedy, William. 1984. Education for a just and peaceful world. *Religious Education* 79(4). p. 554.

⁶ One of the faculty members interviewed noted that he knew that 10-15% of any class would be offended by his teaching, and he has told each new dean that he teaches under to expect negative teaching evaluations in his J & P classes. However, senior status on the faculty allows for more freedom in accepting this outcome and negotiating the reality of negative evaluations of teaching.

sense of the boundedness of inquiry that is not conducive to student retention of new understandings around justice issues and that does not provide the time to truly grapple with the personal implications of this new knowledge. Education around issues that pose a challenge to student identity requires a continuing community of support and challenge that is difficult to establish in a ten week time frame.

Abeyta also reflects on the nature of graduate education in a cultural context that frames education as a commodity: “Students are consumers who want the delivery of goods. They want to *have* the knowledge like they would *have* an SUV.” Students do not come to class expecting to be challenged in the ways that justice education often challenges them. They can become angry because they do not pay to come to class and “suffer.”

Susanne Toton has written about the tendency towards “wordy concern” in justice education rather than actual participation in creating justice. She notes, “Thus, the nagging question for me is how we can educate for justice in a way that is more than ‘wordy concern,’ that is not avoiding the issues, and that moves us toward solidarity with the oppressed.”⁷ The tendency towards wordy concern is particularly dangerous in academic settings where words are our bread and butter. All of these concerns prompt me to be modest in expectations about the possibilities of justice education in an academic setting, while I continue to hope for the possibilities of transformative encounters that can happen in such settings.

Students of Relative Privilege Learning about Justice Issues

When students who are oppressed by structures of power learn about unjust stratifications of power and unequal access to resources, at times their experience can be named and legitimized in new and empowering ways. The individual history of their experience becomes situated in broader social histories of oppression, and there can be great power in this educational moment. Learning how their individual experience fits into structural narratives can lead from a sense of individualized dysfunction and shame to a new sense of solidarity and empowerment. Of course, students often must also struggle with great anger as they come to new awareness of the historic, systematic abuse of persons who share some identifying characteristic with them.

On the other hand, when students who benefit from structures of power learn about the origins and costs of their privilege to other social groups, their experience and the ways they have been taught to name it can be de-legitimized. Within an institution and with a student body who both tend to be relatively privileged in terms of class and racial/ethnic background, one of the persistent issues in teaching justice and peace studies has been addressing the emergence of guilt, anger, and despair as students (and faculty) must relinquish self-understandings, historical understandings of their religious tradition and national context, and inadequate theological and faith formation shaped by dominant narratives that ignore social realities of oppression. This experience may be marked by loss, particularly as those at the socially constructed “center” who feel comfortable in public discourse because it is dominated by their language and cultural context begin to experience themselves as members of an ethnic group rather than just “normal.” Because of the history of racism and cultural domination, this may also involve grief at the loss

⁷ Toton, Suzanne C. 1993. Moving beyond anguish to action: What has Saul Alinsky to say to justice education?. *Religious Education* 88(3): 478-493.

of the privilege of seeing oneself just as an individual and recognizing that others sometimes see them first as a member of an undesirable ethnic group.⁸

Those who wish to teach about justice issues in contexts of privilege have a significant hurdle to leap in terms of student motivation for learning. As Paulo Freire noted, “And the so-called non-poor don’t necessarily have the dream of changing, of being transformed...[W]hat I want to emphasize is that people among the non-poor do not customarily want to be transformed or to give up the privileges which they have enjoyed, and they’re not ready to accept or engage in the kind of education which involves the giving up of those privileges.”⁹ Beyond merely not having the “dream of changing,” students often cannot afford to learn of their privilege because of the enormous costs to their self-understanding and the understanding of their communities of origin.

Respecting the costs of the changes asked of students of privilege in examining justice issues becomes essential to pedagogical approaches in this situation. bell hooks discusses the need to address these costs directly in the classroom: “...[T]here can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches. I respect that pain. And I include recognition of it now when I teach, that is to say, I teach about shifting paradigms and talk about the discomfort it can cause.”¹⁰ hooks engages in the pedagogical practice of inviting students to discuss how their contexts of origin may seem different to them when they return home for holidays after studying questions of race and racism. By interrogating their habits of being in the “home context” in the classroom community, hooks normalizes the experiences of alienation and pain that may go along with new ways of knowing, and invites students into community as they wrestle with these new implications.

Characteristic Temptations of Privileged Students Learning about Justice

In talking to colleagues teaching in the J & P Program, I was intrigued by the various ways they talked about student development in justice education. Drawing on their wisdom, I have begun to experiment with naming five characteristic temptations for students of privilege when they encounter teaching about justice issues that challenges their self-understanding and their call to ministry in various ways. While I will not claim that all relatively privileged students encounter each of these temptations in the process of education about justice issues, I do think there is a characteristic progression in the ways in which students encounter and often give in to these temptations.

The temptation to run The temptation to defensive anger The temptation to neutralize conflict The temptation to “fix it” The temptation to despair
--

⁸ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why do all the black kids sit together in the cafeteria? and other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. p. 102.

⁹ Freire, Paulo. Conversations with Paulo Freire. In Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans, & William Bean Kennedy. *Pedagogies for the Non-Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987. p. 221.

¹⁰ hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. New York: Routledge, 1994. p. 42.

The temptation to run

Perhaps one of the first temptations comes in the desire to simply disregard justice issues as central to Christian ministry. Dana Wilbanks, director of the J& P program for the last several years, notes that one of the major overall goals of the J & P program is to help all students see justice issues as intrinsic to ministry, not just one kind of interest among many (e.g. Bible is your thing and J & P is mine). One of the luxuries of relative privilege is the illusion that issues of justice do not impact privileged students, and therefore they can choose to ignore them. Tony Alumkal talks about assigning students to work on case studies about black churches in a congregational studies class and having white students protest the assignment, saying, “This doesn’t apply to me.” “Tink” Tinker explains that when students “run” in theological education, they generally turn to a characteristic form of western individualism, which often takes the form of an individual caregiving model in ministry: “This isn’t my thing. I’m focusing on pastoral care.”

The temptation to defensive anger

A second temptation of relatively privileged students is the move to defensive anger in the face of challenges posed by justice education. One form is the defensive re-telling of personal anecdotes in the face of historical or social analysis that appears to threaten self-understanding in critical ways. For example, students often want to protect the narrative self-understanding that their life achievements (or those of their ancestors or nation) are the result of virtue and hard work rather than the result of privilege generated by unjust power structures. The re-telling of these narratives in the classroom becomes a defense against hearing the broader structural analysis rather than an opportunity to place these narratives within this broader structure.

Another form that this response takes is an attack on the identity and integrity of the professor who is engaging in justice education. Tinker notes that students often dismiss his teaching by saying: “Tink’s just an angry Indian. Tink just hates white people.” Other professors report the following kinds of responses: “The professor just wants me to feel bad because I’m white (or male, or straight).” Another more oblique form of this temptation is the accusation of naiveté or lack of intellectual understanding on the part of the faculty member when power centers are challenged. Gail Erisman-Valetta often encounters this form of resistance in teaching classes on nonviolent conflict transformation. Students say: “You just don’t understand the real world and how it works.” While we must take seriously the experience of students and the understandings they bring into the classroom, the move to defensive anger can prohibit their encounter with deeper forms of structural analysis that might broaden their contextual understanding of that experience.

The temptation to neutralize conflict

The temptation to neutralize conflict has its roots in the Anglo cultural aversion to conflict as a mode of interaction. Within Anglo styles of interaction, raised voices, passionate engagement, and polarizing conversations are perceived as the precursor of broken relationship. Within this paradigm, conflict indicates a failure in human relationship rather than the potential for creative movement towards social transformation. I have borrowed the phrase “neutralize” from Loring Abeyta, who noted that white folks not only want to avoid conflict, they want to “throw baking soda on it” to put it out completely. In the context of theological education, this temptation is increased by the perception that conflict is not only unseemly, it is somehow ungodly. If white culture indicates a need to throw baking soda on conflict, a predominantly

white theological environment would probably follow that up by spraying it down with flame retardant material to prevent future flare-ups. Students preparing for ministry often want to squelch conflict in classrooms because it somehow indicates that we are not “modeling God’s love” in appropriate ways for a Christian setting. While there is a history in religious educational literature of understanding “troublemaking” as an appropriate form of ministry, this understanding of the potentially generative nature of conflict is not more widely understood in white church circles.¹¹

Abeyta notes further, “White students don’t get that conflict is necessary. The structures of injustice came into being in conflict and, if we are going to address them, more conflict will happen.” More privileged students often imagine that the intended outcome of education about justice issues is that everyone will get along better, that conflict will be eliminated. In the classroom they find that, instead of a pleasant experience of solidarity, the search for knowledge can replicate histories forged in the field of social antagonisms. hooks notes, “Indeed, exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion. The idea that the classroom should always be a ‘safe,’ harmonious place was challenged. It was hard for individuals to fully grasp the idea that recognition of difference might also require of us a willingness to see the classroom change, to allow for shifts in relations between students.”¹² As hooks notes, privileged students often back off in the face of this kind of antagonism. They are not necessarily seeking an educational environment rife with conflict that asks them to acknowledge the human pain embedded in structures of injustice. The temptation becomes to avoid conflict and try to get through the experience “unscathed.”

The temptation to “fix it”

One of the expressions of privilege is the assumption that one has the power to “fix” injustice. Tinker notes, “White people have an inordinate need to want to fix things.” He describes that as the quarter progresses in a J & P class, students begin to despair and want to know what they can do to fix things: “I tell them there are no quick fixes, no easy answers. If we institute a government policy, there are always ramifications that generate more problems and injustice.” The educational goal in the face of this temptation is to move from assumed agency because of a station of privilege to a more modest form of agency that recognizes the depth and seeming intractability of injustice. As more privileged persons, “...power and agency are our ace in the hole,” says Gail Erisman Valeta. Miguel de la Torre notes that it is an expression of the deep connection with structures of power to assume that you can “fix” injustice. The recognition that injustice is embedded in deep structures to which people are ideologically committed brings at first a sort of shock when privileged students discover that they are individually powerless to change the structures. De la Torre notes, “They learn for the first time what many people of color have always already known—how hopeless it really is. Once they lose their idealism, they realize that they are going against the very power structure that gives them power. The goal then is to help them realize the frustration inherent in working for justice, but to still not give up. This is an important part of the learning.”

The temptation to despair

Given the temptation to fix injustice, the temptation to despair is in itself an educational achievement for students who come from a background of racial/ethnic or class privilege.

¹¹ Harris, Maria. *Portrait of youth ministry*. New York: Paulist Press, 1981. See Chapter 7 “Diakonia: The Ministry of Troublemaking.”

¹² Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 30.

As de la Torre notes, despair in the face of the seemingly intractable structures of injustice can be understood as a form of solidarity with the understanding and perspective of oppressed persons. However, despair can become a form of luxury for privileged persons, a response that does not require risk-taking or action in the face of injustice. Students can feel satisfied by their understanding of the enormous complexity of the problem, feel guilty about their history of relative privilege in relationship to other social groups, and feel superior to their colleagues who “just don’t get it.” Unlike persons who are more directly impacted by structures of injustice, more privileged students can “afford” to stop at the point of despair.

Rachel Harding describes this moment more compassionately as “students feeling at a loss with what to do with this information and the variety of feelings it generates.” She also credits her mother, Rosemarie Freeney Harding, with teaching her to check in with students and to not let them stay in that space for long. Harding draws on the wisdom of Anne Braden, a long-time white Southern activist, who reflected on being stuck in that place and how to get out of it. She quotes Braden as saying: “You don’t have time for that. Recognize that you don’t know what to do and follow someone else who does.” Wilbanks also addressed the need to deal directly with the issue of feeling overwhelmed because students always raise the issue of hope and articulate their feelings of despair. He often offered the work of ethicist Sharon Welch to students struggling with despair. Welch works to offer a model of power for people who have it and want to use it well: “A key dimension to this view of power is a nondualistic understanding of good and evil and, correspondingly, images of hope that can counter cynicism and despair without relying on utopian expectations or millennial dreams of inexorable progress and long-lasting social change.”¹³

Before saying more about privileged students moving from despair to modest forms of agency, it seems important to note that these five temptations are not just limited to students. They can also be temptations for faculty members in their teaching practices. Faculty can avoid justice issues because of fear of student response. Faculty can respond in defensive anger to challenging students. Faculty can avoid conflict in the classroom, often in the name of the honorable goal of creating a safe space for all learners. They can suggest easy solutions without acknowledging the very difficult and entrenched systems of injustice. They can allow students to wallow in the luxury of despair without engaging alongside students in expressions of hope and responsible use of power and agency. While I am focusing in this paper on the development of relatively privileged students in engaging these issues, it is important to name that part of the struggle of justice education is that teachers often have the same temptations and struggles as students in seeking further wisdom about issues of justice and peace.

Disrupting the Luxury of Despair: The Goal of Increasing Agency for Engagement

Persons who are not directly affected by issues of injustice or violence, or who more accurately benefit from those situations, do not have a natural incentive to be transformed in their understanding of them. In fact, the luxury is that they can take the moral high ground of feeling bad about these situations, even verbally condemning them, while still internally feeling conflicted about their own privilege and failing to act to transform structures of power. This is the failure of justice education as “wordy concern.” One of the stated goals of the J & P program at Iliff is increased agency to engage in movements for social change or increased leadership in

¹³ Welch, Sharon D. *Sweet dreams in America: making ethics and spirituality work*. New York: Routledge, 1999. p. xi.

building more just institutions. As Freire noted, pedagogies often can result in a change in attitude or way of seeing for the non-poor, but he was more concerned about how this new knowledge translates into transformative action: “For me that is the question....How can we transform the process of transforming the comprehension of the world into a process of transforming the world?”¹⁴

Privileged students need to come to terms with their limited agency and power in the face of injustice, to feel the weight of unjust structures and allow this knowledge to become self-implicating. However, these same students will leave the educational environment and have easier access to positions and situations of power, and they need opportunities and practice in strategizing how to use that power well. Once they have despaired that they don't have total power, the issue becomes how to encourage them to use the modest power they *do* have. De la Torre addresses this directly in the classroom: “When I taught at Hope, I always pointed out that the leaders of West Michigan (government officials, CEO's, etc.) always come from Hope College. So, I point out that they will have power, and ask them what they will do with it when they have it.”

Sharon Welch's book *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* addresses this situation directly. Her key question in this book is: “How, then, do we work, with power and passion, for social justice without the assurances of eventual victory and without the ego- and group-building dynamics of self-righteousness and demonizing?”¹⁵ For Welch, dissolving into unrelenting social critique without taking our own power and capacity for institutional creativity seriously indicates “...a failure of intellect, of creativity, and of solidarity.”¹⁶ Sharon Daloz Parks also describes the failure of young adults from privileged backgrounds to be aware of their power within the systems in which they operate. In an article describing her work with young professionals at Harvard Business School, Parks notes: “Again, their sense of power as individuals (or at least their sense of power as individuals in the role of CEO) seems to be constrained by the limits of an interpersonal imagination; they express little sense of power or imagination in relationship to the socioeconomic fabric of their wider public life.”¹⁷ Each of the pedagogical innovations in the next session describes a practice designed to assist students in gaining a modest sense of their own power and moving beyond despair to hope in providing leadership towards more just social structures.

Pedagogical Responses to Student Temptations

The longstanding presence of this program has encouraged multiple professors to develop unique pedagogical approaches to educate students about justice issues in this context in response to the characteristic temptations of relatively privileged students. This creative pedagogical response has taken many forms, some of which I name in the chart and explore in the paragraphs below. While I have begun in the chart to connect these pedagogical innovations to the named student temptations, the chart implies a neat correlation when in reality many of the responses work at multiple temptations on multiple levels. The chart suggests some connections and invites other connections not yet made in this paper.

¹⁴ Freire, in *Pedagogies for the Non-Poor*, p. 220.

¹⁵ Welch, *Sweet dreams*, p. xii.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Parks, Sharon Daloz. “Young Adults and the Formation of Professional Ethics” in *Can Ethics Be Taught?: Perspectives, Challenges, and Approaches at Harvard Business School*. Boston: Harvard Business School, 13-65.

Temptation	Pedagogical Responses
Run	Negotiating Buy-In Multiple Voices, Multiple Encounters Engaging Arts and Spiritual Practice
Defensive Anger	Multiple Voices, Multiple Encounters Histories of Resistance Communities of Support and Accountability
Neutralize Conflict	Unveiling Conflict in the Classroom Embracing Institutional Conflict
Fixing It	Teaching Analysis Political Compromise and Normalizing Failure
Despair and Guilt	Histories of Resistance Engagement with Ongoing Praxis Communities of Support and Accountability Engaging Arts and Spiritual Practice Teaching Analysis Ecology of Approaches

Negotiating Buy-In

In one way or another, many of the faculty members I interviewed strategize about the ways in which they have to negotiate the buy-in of students. Tinker was most explicit about this process: “I came as an Indian who thought these white people needed to know this, and I was going to tell them. I spent a lot of time generating that defensive anger. Now I find myself working hard to find ways of negotiating their buy-in. That’s a real skill, too.” Tinker indicated that he had to find increasingly creative ways to say what he needed to say so students can hear it. For instance, since the majority of students have an inclination to spiritual nurture of individuals, Tinker uses their interest in spiritual nurture as a way to get them into justice issues: “How can you let people naively sit there with their hands folded in prayer when they don’t know what’s going on? That their lifestyle is causing great harm to persons in Guatemala, in other places where people work all day for a dollar?” Wilbanks also names the practice of inquiring about the interests of students and finding ways to connect their existing commitments to justice issues. De la Torre often uses student commitment to the Bible to engage their interest in addressing issues of justice through having them look at passages that demand just action as a faithful response to God. In multiple ways, faculty members find themselves inviting and repeatedly attempting to draw students back into conversation about justice as they are tempted to run from it or respond in defensive anger.

Teaching Histories of Resistance

One key element in helping students move beyond despair in the face of structures of injustice and beyond guilt in their histories of privilege is to teach the histories of resistance to those structures and the stories of those who have gained modest success in seeking more just structures. At Iliff, a key resource for this teaching has been the Veterans of Hope Project. One element of this program, founded by Vincent and Rosemarie Freeney Harding, is an oral history project designed to draw on the personal stories of grassroots movement participants to provide

models of encouragement, healing and social transformation for the 21st century. By teaching how particular persons worked within the limitations of their human situations to struggle for justice, students' imaginations can be enlivened to strategize their own potential for engaging in grassroots movements for social transformation. The project has recorded and made available for educational use grassroots leaders telling their stories of resistance and resilience in their own words. Rachel Harding notes the importance of students knowing that there is a long chain of struggle that's been present since the very beginning in American history: "People of all races have been involved in making new histories of resistance—the labor movement, abolitionists, suffragettes. People need these other kinds of heroes."

Harding also describes the practice she learned from her parents of starting any kind of educational gathering by asking participants to introduce themselves and saying something about their grandmother or the oldest living relative with whom they are acquainted. While at one level, this is a manner of introduction that everyone can participate in and get their voice into the circle, Harding has begun to name it in recent years as "calling the ancestors into place." She notes, "All of us have connections if we look back far enough to people who have been through some stuff. One of the things that inhibits wealthier white students from connecting immediately with oppressed persons is the disconnect they have with their own history of struggle. This is one of the things you have to give up to be white. I'll get to this theoretically later in the term, but this is a way to start experientially to understand these connections." In this way, students are invited to name their own ancestors as sharing in the histories of oppression and resistance that they hope to emulate. Harding notes further that her father encourages white students to choose their own ancestors: "You need to choose a different kind of ancestor. Choose Anne Braden and live into her legacy of whiteness. Choose the abolitionists and the suffragettes." While choosing to focus on white persons in history who engaged in antiracist work can be a comfortable option for white students who are tempted to guilt and despair about the actions of their own ancestors, it can also be a real challenge and accountability for students to look closely at the stories of these alternative models and see what the involvement in justice work truly cost them.

Introducing Multiple Voices and Multiple Encounters:

In the face of defensive anger and the temptation to run from the realities of injustice, many professors have found that introducing multiple voices from multiple cultural contexts and social locations becomes an important pedagogical strategy. De la Torre noted this in the context of indicating why sitting down to talk with actual persons living under conditions of oppression was critical: "Everything I say is taken with a grain of salt. Hearing people tell their own stories is what changes students." De la Torre initially invited guest speakers from the community into the classroom to try to introduce multiple voices and give students the opportunity to hear real people talk about their stories of living under conditions of oppression. Eventually he stopped this practice because the guest speakers were unwilling to offend students and softened their stories too much. He turned to literature and film as sources of multiple voices that didn't pull any punches. Tinker also noted that exposing students to a wide variety of literature from all kinds of situations helps reduce the temptation of defensive anger and the temptation to name justice issues as isolated to the opinions of the professor: "Then it's not just me saying it."

In addition to hearing about justice issues from a number of voices and a number of contexts, students benefit from coming across these issues over and over again in all areas of the curriculum. Loring Abeyta named this as a sort of "desensitizing" process that allows students

to face up to the harsh realities of injustice and cross “the line of resistance” to get to a place where they can work with the information. All of the counter-teaching of social ideology available in the broader cultural context cannot be overcome by just one encounter or one class experience with a text or professor. Repeated exposure is critical to the potential for transformation of understanding and action in students of privilege.

Teaching Analysis

Most of the faculty I interviewed stressed the importance of teaching students to pursue sustained and self-critical analysis of situations in which they hope to intervene to create more just structures. Analysis is critical not only to avoiding the temptation to “fix” situations, but also to identify potential opportunities for transformation. Tinker notes, “I keep telling them, you have to know before you act, and you have to know the limits of your action. If you can do the analysis, you know a great deal. I hope that this is one of the things they carry away: if they can at least do the analysis, that’s where it begins. And it’s not a one-time thing.” Wilbanks also noted that while the student temptation is to move immediately to solutions, they will quickly find that they won’t have much clarity about what should be done or how to go about it. He notes, “With analysis can come fresh ideas, a clearer handle on what are some of the root causes and where to intervene to make a difference.” While analysis is part of a larger cycle of praxis and reflection, faculty name the capacity to engage in careful and sustained analysis as a key educational achievement and goal of justice education in academic environments.

Establishing Communities of Support and Accountability

Communities of support and accountability become important on a number of different levels within the J & P program. At one level, the entire Iliff community strives to embody an ethos valuing justice and peace as a countervailing environment to the broader social context, perhaps most successfully around issues of sexism and heterosexism. Wilbanks notes, “The dynamic is to create an ethos that is sustaining, because there are not very many other contexts where that progressive ethos is sustained and empowered.” For example, inclusive language is required on student written work, and challenges to the full inclusion of GLBT persons in the ministry of the church are rarely heard in Iliff classrooms. At the same time, this has some cost for students who then are unprepared for the resistance that they encounter when they leave the “safe bubble” of Iliff.

Wilbanks also noted the importance of friendships between J & P “true believers” and more skeptical or tangentially involved students within the broader Iliff community. He named the ways in which the more committed students benefited from the questions and skepticism of the more marginally involved students. At the same time, the more marginally involved students learn from and are influenced by the students who are willing to risk more and who call them into greater awareness of and accountability to justice issues. Wilbanks notes that at times these friendships across lines of differing commitment within the program can achieve what instructors cannot in their teaching. Both the weekly “Justice and Pizza” luncheons and the quarterly praxis courses provide ongoing opportunities for students to build these kinds of friendships within the broader Iliff community.

At times in the J & P program there have been student-led efforts in establishing more formal communities of support and accountability. One group of students continued to meet with one another to maintain accountability ties after the “Race, Gender, Class” class had

finished its term. Students have also been encouraged by faculty to establish ties with organizing “veterans” in the Denver community when they are considering engaging in social action and resistance. For example, two years ago four students involved in the J & P program decided to engage in civil disobedience and protest a local producer of missiles after the beginning of the Iraq War. Faculty members helped the students get into contact with local peace activists, who helped them to contact the police department and administrators in the corporation they were planning to protest prior to their action. Prior to the action, the four students invited the broader Iliff community into prayerful solidarity with their action. In the wake of their subsequent arrest, the students again turned to the broader Iliff community for legal representation and financial support as they made court appearances and engaged in community service. After the action, the students shared in a forum with the entire school to discuss their action and the ways in which the other, more veteran peace activists had helped them navigate the experience. The entire process helped other students understand the ways in which a community of accountability and support was crucial to the outcome of the action. While faculty can encourage this form of community, it is difficult to establish structurally and must emerge more organically in response to student desire.

Wilbanks also helps students to identify the communities to which they are already connected as a counter to despair in the face of their individual inability to “fix” all of the issues of injustice about which they are learning. He notes, “I talk to them about the church as an institution that at its best (on a denominational or connectional level at least) is involved in all of the significant issues we discuss. So they are a part of a community and don’t have to do it all alone. Mainline churches have comprehensive involvement, and they can make intentional choices about the issues they and their congregations feel passionate about, while noting the multidimensional character of the church.” Other faculty also name the histories of resistance, the great cloud of witnesses, and ancestors as the tangible and yet mystical presence of those who have gone before us. Abeyta notes that faculty continually have to remind students that they can “stand on the shoulders of giants,” building on the important work of people who have been struggling to understand these issues theoretically and to engage them in praxis for years. In this way, students can imagine themselves into an historic community of accountability and support.

Unveiling Conflict in the Classroom

I have chosen the term “unveiling” to indicate that faculty are not just introducing conflict into a previously peaceful classroom, but rather they are making students aware of where it already exists in people’s identities, ways of being, and relationships with one another even as social ideology works to mask it. At times, making students aware of conflict requires a rather dramatic incident because of the strength of the shared consensus that must be disrupted for conflict to become evident. Tinker notes that the real resolution of any critical issue only comes when the issue is alive enough to generate real debate and conflict. He notes that in the 60’s and 70’s this process was called “polarization,” but without the current negative connotation that the term elicits. He notes, “Now it is a negative term, we don’t want to polarize a group at all costs. Why not? The truth may be in between the two poles, but we won’t find it without debate.” Abeyta also notes that breaking through the barriers of comfort is necessary for learning to occur: “Students need to get worked up enough about the issues to talk about them with their peers and carry them everywhere else they go for a while.”

De la Torre has nicknamed his own pedagogical style the “2x4 approach.” For example, in a theology course populated by predominately white, conservative Christians, he likes to start with a quote from James Cone: “All white theology is satanic.” He notes that while students’ first reaction is shock and anger, as a person of color, it helps students begin to apprehend his perspective as a person whose entire identity is constantly challenged. De la Torre notes that although he starts with the hard-hitting statement, he doesn’t leave students bleeding: “I start with the provocative comment, then unpack what it means, and eventually many of them come to the agreement that the way we do Christianity is often Satanic.” De la Torre also couples the conflictual approach with the use of humor: “I don’t want to just cause pain. I want us to laugh at the pain and move forward. I can say very difficult things while they are laughing.” He credits the Cuban tradition of “choteo” of teaching him to use humor as a venue for social critique and an opportunity to say hard things that you need to say in the classroom.

One of the real differences across those I interviewed was their willingness to utilize conflict in the classroom. My hunch is that the cultural factors around styles of communication and understandings of conflict that I explored earlier come into play in faculty approaches to conflict in the classroom. For some faculty, conflict is a necessary evil that can potentially be used creatively when it emerges in the classroom. However, conflict is a sign of the need for transformative work in the classroom. Other faculty actively seek (and even encourage) conflict as a means of clarifying understanding, de-centering students, and generating motivation for learning. In this manner, many of the faculty I interviewed agree with William Kennedy: “We learn when our adrenaline runs.”¹⁸

Embracing Institutional Conflict and Disruption

Institutional life can become complicated when faculty are teaching students about organizing for justice, speaking truth to power, and resisting hierarchies of power that do not encourage democratic participation. The school will eventually become the target of student energizing energies. Conflict and political negotiation permeate the community, and faculty and members of the administration will be called into account for the ways in which the structures of the school replicate broader social injustice. In the past two years, Iliff has had broad student organizing and protest about an American flag being placed on campus at the start of the Iraq War by a large donor to the school and about the school’s perceived intention to follow through on commitments made to diversity at the highest levels of the administration.¹⁹ A running joke on campus is that it is a banner year when graduation is not being protested by some element of the student body. This means that faculty, administration, and even the Board of Trustees has to be willing to deal with the consequences of politicizing the student body, are called to have hard conversations with each other, and must work hard to model the principles that are taught in classes. Additionally, this reputation can become a liability with potential donors in the community who do not share the understanding that justice work is intrinsic to Christian ministry. What is initially taught in a few classrooms can quickly become raised to the level of institutional identity and commitments when such disruptions and protests occur.

¹⁸ Kennedy, William. 1984. Education for a just and peaceful world. *Religious Education* 79(4). p.556

¹⁹ The latter of which was publicized locally by students who had participated in a J & P praxis entitled “The Role of Media in Democracy” with Amy Goodman.

Teaching Political Compromise and Normalizing Failure

Related to the temptation to “fix” social injustice is the unwillingness to compromise political idealism and engage in action for social justice even when the outcome of that action will not “fix” the problem. Sharon Welch describes well how the Euro-American middle class resists engaging in action when faced with complex problems because the outcome of that action cannot be controlled. As an alternative, she notes: “Within an ethic of risk, actions begin with the recognition that far too much has been lost and there are no clear means of restitution. The fundamental risk constitutive of this ethic is the decision to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success.”²⁰ Students must move from maintaining ideological purity to understanding the necessity of political compromise and risking failure in engaging work for social justice.

Students, particularly relatively privileged students, live in a society where they are told they do not have to risk or lose anything. Even though failure is an expected outcome in corporate America, the middle class norm is to avoid engaging in any activity where it is likely that failure will be an outcome. Abeyta directly counters this understanding in coaching students about working for social justice: “My mantra with students is always: 1. You have to risk something. 2. You’re going to lose something. 3. You have to figure out who do you trust. 4. You have to have courage.” In classroom practice, she often backs up this mantra with stories of her own failures and losses in the process of organizing. Abeyta also emphasizes the pedagogical practice of faculty reflecting with students on their organizing failures and helping them to re-frame them in light of the inevitability of failure when taking on enormously complex issues.

Teaching histories of resistance can also be an opportunity to reflect on the necessity of compromise and failure in the process of working for justice. Teaching alternative ideologies about social issues is quite distinct from helping students to become politically active in transforming structures. I once taught a class of thirteen women in which we were reading about women throughout the centuries who had engaged in practices of religious education. A significant moment occurred when one student presented on Georgia Harkness, a woman in United Methodist history who played a critical role in the fight to win ordination rights for women in that denomination. The student told the story of how Harkness stood by at the General Conference in which the vote was taken for women to become ordained while a male colleague presented the motion and spoke on its behalf. The women in the class were outraged that after her decades-long struggle, Harkness was not the one who presented the case for the vote. This became a critical opportunity to discuss the difference between understanding theologically and ethically why women should be ordained and being able to maneuver politically so that a patriarchal institution could be changed. This move from ideological purity to discernment about political strategy within unjust institutions is critical in enlivening student agency to provide sustainable leadership in justice ministries.

Engagement with Ongoing Praxis

One of the unique innovations of the J & P program within the Iliff curriculum is the praxis seminars. Taught in partnership by local practitioners in justice ministry, the seminars invite students to participate for a weekend in the ongoing work of a local person committed to social justice or peacemaking work. By engaging alongside persons who have been engaged in praxis, students are given one vision for how they might get involved. Additionally, students are

²⁰ Welch, Sharon. *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Revised edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. 68.

able to hear practitioners talk about their own ongoing work and how it has been sustained over time. The inclusion of the praxis seminars is a way in an academic setting to indicate to students that what we are doing in J & P education is not the same thing as the creation of justice. In addition to the weekend praxis seminars, many courses require some element of engagement as a class assignment, such as being a participant-observer in an actual social protest or action during the quarter. Also, J & P concentration students are required to engage in field education at an ongoing site of justice ministry. Finally, several faculty members noted that it is engagement in ongoing praxis when students leave school that actually serves to transform more permanently their understanding about social issues. De la Torre noted that his job in class is to “needle students with questions” and get them engaged enough so that they get involved in praxis when they leave school.

Engaging Arts and Spiritual Practice

The issue of student despair was foremost in ensuring that regular classes on the relationship of spirituality and justice and peace have been offered in the J & P program. Wilbanks notes that the reason for establishing these courses was to explore how to develop a spirituality that would really sustain commitments the faculty in the J & P program hoped to engender. In addition to these courses on spirituality, one focus of the oral history interviews of the Veterans of Hope project is the spiritual resources that sustained grassroots commitments to social justice transformation in the veterans for more than thirty years of work. In this way, the study of historical figures can provide insights into nurturing resilience through the use of religious resources.

In addition to addressing student despair, some faculty members have drawn on arts and spiritual practice as an opportunity of connection between privileged students and the stories, perspectives and wisdom of oppressed persons. Harding notes that she uses dance and music, important religious elements of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora religions she teaches about, to help students enter into serious study of these traditions. When faced with students “who may think their life experience separates them from other kinds of people,” she finds that helping them “use other parts of their intellect and understanding other than the analytical” allows an opportunity for connection and learning to occur. Harding brings in artists and practitioners and invites students to participate in the practices as a way of moving towards understanding of the connection between these religious resources and movements towards greater social healing. Again, faculty members differ on their understanding of the potential risks and benefits of student engagement in the spiritual practices of traditions other than their own because of the histories of inappropriate cultural appropriation.

Maintaining Ecology of Approaches

As evidenced in the above discussions of utilizing spiritual practice and introducing conflict in the classroom, faculty members exhibit a creative tension in their approaches to justice education. In my own reflection on their comments and through my participant-observation in the program over the past three years, one key element for the success of the program has been an unreflective but intuitive ecological balance established within the faculty of the program. One way I would describe the balance is between those faculty members who clearly see their calling as encouraging the nascent commitments of students and helping them to sustain those commitments and those who name their teaching task more in terms of holding

students feet to the fire and asking them to face up to some hard truths. Of course, all faculty members engage in both to some degree, but they tend to lean stylistically to one emphasis or the other. When engaging in justice education with more privileged students, both moments seem critical to maintain for student development towards appropriate forms of agency.

Failures, Limitations, and Ambiguities

When asked to name the limitations and failures of teaching justice issues to relatively privileged students, faculty most often named “recitivism” as a key concern. Many of the faculty have watched students who were clearly articulate about and committed to justice issues be transformed when they are placed in positions of leadership in communities where vested interests worked to maintain structures of injustice in various ways. Abeyta also named this in terms of student failure to retain knowledge from class to class, and to revert from systemic analysis to anecdotal reporting in their written work. In this way, our teaching about justice mirrors the experience of students who will engage in action towards social justice. For all of the creative strategies named in this paper, I could name the ways in which teaching within the program has failed to live up to these ideals. We could be more intentional about conversing about our collective teaching work within the program and the appropriate pedagogical strategies to move towards our goals. In conclusion, justice education in academic contexts of privilege is complicated, inadequate, and compromised. We are likely to fail in significant ways. However, as Welch notes, “The results of such awareness does not have to be violence, cynicism, or resignation. There are cultural metaphors of energy and vitality that can come from working with obstacles, limits, ambiguity, and transience.”²¹ In other words, we are called to a modest sense of agency, a thorough awareness of the seeming intractability of the structures of injustice, and an attempt to provide leadership anyway.

²¹ Welch, *Sweet Dreams*, 16.