

## Liberal Studies II, Final Synthesis Paper - Alison Farmer

Every moment in life we have a choice whether to enter life's waters and float, or try to swim upstream. It is easier, and the goal of a balanced life, to travel with the flow. But what happens if we find out the direction of the river is being controlled and dammed by a powerful few. Is it still OK to let the river carry you! Learning about Diversity, Power and Privilege touches on some disturbing, but very important subjects. It encourages you to take responsibility for what you chose to be part of. It takes us down a raging river full of boulders and rapids, swirling the waters and bringing many things to the surface. This class revealed a lot about my own past, as well as a deeper murky side of America I had not been aware of.

It was fascinating to learn about the creation of a new society in America through the masquerade of William Shakespeare's play the "Tempest" (Takaki, 1993, p. 25). As a British Citizen, it was easy for me to relate to the political ideals behind the structure of the United States through this European parallel. It was the power of politics in action and oppression by men largely from my own country. Ronald Takaki's book "A Different Mirror" captured a lot of my own feelings about emigrating to America in 2001, including the struggle to "fit in". History becomes easier to understand when you can see it from the perspective of the cultures involved and in a time context of when it happened. Takaki's book, though long, contains personal reflections from some of the major ethnic influxes that the United States of America experienced during its formation. It is a "re-visioned" history, where much of what people have been told is "unlearned" and substituted with a "more inclusive and accurate history" (Takaki, 1993, p. 426). When someone arrives in this country they bring many dreams wrapped up in their own cultures. They may leave their own country, but their ideologies are often deeply ingrained and not so

easily left behind, even if they want to, or are made to. The personal experiences related in Takaki capture the authentic experience of different nationalities emigrating to America. America has always looked like a country of "immigrants" to me and most people I meet are eager to tell me of their European roots. Understanding how different ethnic groups moved as the United States expanded under political domination was a lesson in history, anthropology, geography and sociology.

Learning about the different "isms" greatly enhanced my awareness about them. During the term I found the world suddenly full of prejudice. My email inbox was no longer full of daily jokes, it was full of daily oppression through ridicule. My favorite television programs suddenly portrayed images of "perfect" stereotypes that leave others feeling inadequate. My own life viewed through the window of "Sexism" became one of oppression where, in my unawareness, I have been diligently following the "path of least resistance for women: silent attentiveness, hesitation, self-doubt, and humility" (Johnson, 2001, p. 100). This combined with the new knowledge of internalized "Classism" has helped me understand some self-worth issues that have been haunting me. Investigation into linguistic indicators of Classism has yielded answers to some problems I have experienced with Higher Education. The Learning Goals for this class is a very clear example of structural classism at work through language. When asked to clarify Goal 4; "To explore multiple frames of reference, models, and worldviews to assess how variations in perspectives challenge social change and multicultural process" it was nicely reframed as "how does holding a variety of points of view challenge the status quo? as in how does seeing various shades of grey threaten those who think only in black or white terms?" The language used in the first is complex and exclusive, the second speaks to all who can read.

One of the most interesting things Takaki explains in his book is; the complicated and little understood history of racism that still exists within this country. His parallels to the "Tempest" and the hidden origins of slavery was insightful. When you learn that racism is a social construction still being used by those in power to control and divide (Takaki, 1993, p. 10), it makes you question the concept of it. When you find out your feelings attached to the word black could be coloring your view of people who have that color skin, it makes you question what other conditioned responses are inappropriate.

Allan Johnson's book "Privilege, Power and Difference" discusses "White Privilege", the power and responsibility that comes from waking up each morning with white skin. I had never thought of this, never mind it being part of my life or me being part of the solution to ending oppression suffered by those who are not white. Our world is full of entire systems that effect the way we think and feel about ourselves and others. Johnson points out very clearly, how we are part of many fluid social systems that continue to perpetuate oppression. How "privilege is created and maintained through social systems that are dominated by, centered on, and identified with privileged groups" (Johnson, 2001, p. 141). How these systems only continue to operate by people taking the "path of least resistance". Johnson's solution is one I agree with. His book makes it clear that "the matrix of privilege and domination" shows any "work for change needs to focus on the idea of privilege itself and all the forms it takes" (Johnson, 2001, pp. 55-56). He maintains change has to come from those who are privileged. First they have to recognizing the privilege they hold, then admit to the responsibility this brings. If people can see they are part of the problem, they will see how they need to be part of the solution and chose

the path of "greater" resistance to enable change. Social change comes through an inter-dependant relationship, we are always participating in something greater than ourselves.

That brings me down to the one learning goal that I feel hardly got covered in the classroom structure. The development of "communication skills that emphasize constructive dialogue and respect for cross-cultural perspective" was sadly lacking for me. There was little space made for dialogue and no advice given on how to handle potential confrontational situations surrounding prejudice. When oppression is being played out, silence is an action to be avoided and the path of greatest resistance encouraged, some steps onto this path would have been helpful. Throughout my 18 months at Antioch, unless invited to participate personally, I have experienced problems with speaking up in class. Apart from my presentations to the class, I do not feel I contributed much. Different cultures have different ways of interacting in group settings (the British tend to be reserved) and I may have been the only non-American in the classroom. Whether my hesitation to "speak up" is down to sexism oppression, internalized classism or cultural conditioning, it does not matter. A class covering Diversity, Power and Privilege should make sure everyone's voice is heard, not just those who are "able" to speak up. There was not much attempt made to build connections to others in the class, something Johnson sees as crucial to ending oppression. After nine weeks together I know few personal details of my classmates and only some of their names.

I do not feel the class was very well constructed or orchestrated, but during it I have been guilty of following the path of least resistance and staying silent. Attendance in class added little to my knowledge base outside of the reading material. Constant changes to the syllabus made it difficult to pre-plan assignments and caused unnecessary work. Being technically assigned to

the wrong class for over half of the term proved a problem. Apart from my own presentation on classism, which I did a lot of extra research on, I gained little new information about any of the other ism's. Having the "ism's" covered by different groups worked well as a focus on each subject, but in-depth research was lacking and it left little time for much else. I feel the main benefit of this class for me has been - AWARENESS.

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) once said; "We drive into the future using only our rear view mirror". He was a culture critic who believed contemporary culture only offered the illusion of diversity and our "environments are not just containers, but are processes that change the content totally." I don't think I really understood the magnitude of this statement until now, it seems our actions and thoughts are being continually manipulated. Mitsuye Yamada said "to finally recognize our own invisibility, is to finally be on the path toward visibility" (Takaki, 1993, p. 426). This class has opened my eyes to the origins that have shaped me, and gifted a more authentic vision for the future. "By viewing ourselves in a mirror which reflects reality, we can see our past as undistorted and no longer have to peer into our future as through a glass darkly" (Takaki, 1993, p. 426). This quote captures what the class has given me. It has been a white water ride that has taken me to the murky depths of the river bed but yields clear waters ahead. The class has certainly broadened my awareness across multiple dimensions and will make me ask, "Who controls the river and how many people will be drowned or held back if I choose to flow with it?".