

Social Justice and Caring

By

Angela Valenzuela

University of Illinois, Chicago Commencement Speech

May 7, 2009

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to speak before you on the topic of social justice and caring. As you move on to the next stage in your careers, this must surely be a time of excitement and wonderment. I remember that when I was in your same shoes that I contemplated my calling. What exactly is my calling? What am I being called to do in life? And you may be asking that yourselves. And if not, you've probably answered this question for yourself already. And if so, I applaud you for arriving at an answer.

In any case, for me, at the time, my answer to this question was more about what I was meant to do rather than about who I was meant to be.

On the eve of my graduation from graduate school when I got my master's degree, I remember my father—a lay pastor and mailman—when he imparted his words of wisdom. In a reflective tone, he told me, “Angela, with your credentials, with your education, you're going to be able to go places and do things that I never got the chance to do. With a few words, he referred to an entire history of Jim Crow conditions that in West Texas where we are from blunted opportunity for Mexican Americans and African Americans alike for generations.

In a reflective voice, he also said “People in powerful places are going to respect you just because you have that degree next to your name. All that I ask is that you never forget where you came from and be just and compassionate in all your ways.”

As I contemplate the connection between social justice and caring, and all that has been written about it—by myself, Bill Ayers, Nel Noddings, and so many others—

I feel confident that the connections between the two have been excellently theorized and empirically demonstrated. This scholarship of course underscores the simultaneous importance, on the one hand, of being culturally relevant, dialogical, ethical, valuing diversity, biculturalism, and helping students to achieve the full measure of their humanity.

On the other hand this scholarship points to the importance of being politically aware by actively challenging oppressive regimes like high-stakes testing, as well as English-only and zero-tolerance policies.

Clearly this is a calling for all of us to be educators and leaders who bridge social justice and caring through an advocacy agenda—however large or small, grandiose or mundane—as a way of being, as a *modus operandi*.

Having said this, I feel that what may be missing from this by now rather expansive scholarship on caring is a much deeper, psychic sense of justice. That is, not only an “outer justice,” but an “inner” one, as well. With the very future of our planet at stake, our collective goal as educators should be to awaken all of the senses of those around us to present social, economic, political, and ecological conditions and how all of these relate to each other.

In telling me to be just and compassionate in all my ways, my father’s words sound like those of renowned educational philosopher, John Dewey whose writings provide an implicit framework for conducting the inner-work that we—with degrees, respect and opportunity—might ought to heed.

Specifically, in a book by Fishman and McCarthy titled *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope* (2007), the authors derive several keys to Deweyan hope that we might use as guides to help orient and order our mental, emotional, and bodily state in a way that ideally informs our practice. I will focus on three keys of Deweyan hope: Belonging, purpose, and gratitude toward our ancestors.

The first is living with gratitude as a source of belonging. When I researched schooling orientations and achievement patterns in a Houston, inner-city school, I observed this need to belong among young people. In fact, their chief complaint about school was that their teachers did not care for them. Interestingly, their teachers said that the students did not care either. Though both students and teachers used the same word—to “care”—they really meant different things. While teachers meant that students do not care *about* schooling, students meant that teachers do not care *for* them. Teachers had a conditional form of caring. That is, I will care *for* you if you will care *about* the curriculum.

Students implied the direct opposite: I will care *about* the curriculum if you will care *for* me. Students offered a different vision of education. This is a vision that is consistent with caring theory and that is premised on a sense of unconditional love, relation, and a shared inter-dependence—in short, a sense of belonging.

Another key to Deweyan hope is living with gratitude as a sense of purpose. We have all been created to have a dream and a destiny. Every dream is tested. And some get detoured, lost, or delayed. If you have been tested in any of these ways, then either try to re-kindle the fire of lost or diverted dreams or simply trust that the journey from dream to promise is often our toughest work.

In the words of one of Mexico's most famous singers and song writers, José Alfredo Jimenez, "*No hay que llegar primero; solo hay que saber llegar.*" ("You don't have to get there first; you only have to know how to get there").

A third key to Deweyan hope is that we are to live with gratitude toward our ancestors. This question acquires added significance when we consider that it's so north American to *not* connect with one's extended kin and where knowledge itself systematically excludes ancestral knowledge as a legitimate basis for knowing about the world.

When I burn the copal, the incense, used in tribal ceremonies by my ancient ancestors and I send a wish or release an anxiety to the heavens above, I hunger for the memory of their original instructions at the same time that I contemplate in awe their sacrifices and the logic-defying chain of events that led to my very existence—much less my success. Something much grander and much bigger than ourselves must surely be at play.

In his towering achievement, German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, and author of *Being and Time*, provides some guidance. Specifically, he located an early Latin text with allusions to Greek cosmology where "care" as you shall see is personified in a way that joyfully captures the awesome fact of our being in the universe:

Once when "Care" was crossing a river, she saw some clay; she thoughtfully took up a piece and began to shape it. While she was meditating on what she had made, Jupiter came by. "Care" asked him to give it spirit, and this he gladly granted. But when she wanted her name to be bestowed upon it,

he forbade this, and demanded that it be given his name instead. While “Care” and Jupiter were disputing, Earth arose and desired that her own name be conferred on the creature, since she had furnished it with part of her body. They asked Saturn to be their arbiter, and he made the following decision, which seemed a just one: “Since you, Jupiter, have given its spirit, you shall receive that spirit in its death; and since you, Earth, have given its body, you shall receive its body. But since “Care” first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives. And because there is now a dispute among you as to its name, let it be called “homo” for it is made out of humus (earth).

This is a loving, intimate declaration not of the individual in society, but rather of relation, of caring as the essential building block of existence. Might our original instructions include this very central idea that because of care, we exist? And without it, we will certainly perish.

This message of peril and hope comes forth in a poem titled, “Hopi Elders Speak,” offered by the elders of the Hopi Nation in Oraibi, Arizona.

"You have been telling the people that this is the Eleventh Hour.

Now you must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour.

And there are things to be considered:

Where are you living?

What are you doing?

What are your relationships?

Are you in right relation?

Where is your water?

Know your garden.

It is time to speak your Truth.

Create your community.

Be good to each other.

And do not look outside yourself for the leader.

This could be a good time!

There is a river flowing now very fast.

It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid.

They will try to hold on to the shore.

They will feel they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly.

Know the river has its destination.

The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of

The river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.

See who is in there with you and celebrate.

At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally.

Least of all, ourselves.

For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey
comes to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves!

Banish the word struggle from your attitude and your vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we've been waiting for."

To conclude, however difficult the road ahead may be, follow your dreams, celebrate the company of those of us who journey together for the cause of social justice, be of good courage, never forget where you came from— and be just and compassionate in all your ways. Look internally, not externally. For the great job

that lies ahead, let us count ourselves among the privileged. “We are the ones we've been waiting for.” Thank you very much.