

Marin Voice: Redefining the Essence of Social Justice

By Cesar S. Lagleva

October 7, 2011

I RECENTLY RETURNED from South Africa after conducting a week-long workshop on race and gender equity at the University of the Free State. The thrust of my work was to introduce a social justice model and framework that works to promote the process of transformation and social change through racial and gender lenses. UFS invited me to work with its students and faculty staff as part of its ongoing efforts to transform the university's culture and atmosphere, consistent to its mission of valuing diversity, inclusion and equity. Needless to say, my work was personally and professionally rewarding as the experience gave me an opportunity to meet great people, learn the socio-cultural dynamics of the area and to offer my skills which I hope were of value.

However, I experienced a very profound and humbling spiritual awakening which revealed a deeper meaning of social justice. I befriended a bisexual woman and a gay man, both Whites, who left an indelible footprint at the core of my humanity. We connected on a common vision by sharing personal stories of our individual and collective struggles, hopes, fears and vision for the future. The basic meaning of fellowship based on mutual respect, kindness, trust and honesty enriched the depths of our conversations. We discussed and examined the various meanings of social justice in the context of privilege. The unearned privileges which are defined, approved and sanctioned by a few but powerful people that have controlled and maintained institutions, structures and systems in our society, and that have divided us between the lines of gender, race and orientation were conceptualized through a spiritual prism that I have never experienced before. Words such as healing, transformation, liberation and justice all came together in my brief contact with my new found friends and allies.

When I returned home, I read one of my favorite quotes from Dr. King which read **“Power is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change....Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”** It was at this moment that I experienced great clarity about my work as a community activist. The process of creating an equitable society is not limited to an outward act of correcting the wrongs. That in the absence of my own healing from the injustices that I have inflicted onto others, what others have done to me and what I have done to hurt myself, I can never fully appreciate and understand the true essence of social justice. Forgiving and loving ones' self through the power of spiritual healing is as critical of a piece to social justice work as the act of pursuing social justice in of itself. The qualities of respect, kindness, forgiveness, courage, commitment, compassion should re-define and serve as the compass to finding our shared and common struggles to achieving equity, rather than our competing interests for power through anger and violence which all too often lead to the perpetuation of more injustices.

The privilege to have met many South Africans committed to rebuilding a post apartheid society provided me with a great sense of humility and strength through loving and conscious dialogue about our common vision. Moreover, it provided a spiritual space and experience which deepened my desire to connect more closely with others, especially with two beautiful people who do not reflect my daily interactions and reality in America. The common thread that will keep us together lies not only in our passion to pursue justice from the make-up of our differences and our collective struggles, but also through a spiritual lens which we share as human beings.

Cesar Lagleva

Recipient of 2008 Marin Community Foundation's Beryl Buck Achievement Award for Social Justice and Former Chair of the Marin County Human Rights Commission.