Searching for Social Justice

“Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance. Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table.”

~ Bill Moyers

Social Justice is not an easy thing to describe. It is a term that is not used often in everyday life. The term means different things depending on an individual’s view point and the context they are using it in. My view point on Social Justice comes from my time in high school. I was lucky enough to attend Jesuit High School in Carmichael, California. Social Justice was a phrase I learned from my freshman year and used continuously until graduation. It is a cornerstone of a Jesuit education. My definition of Social Justice changed from year to year, however. My freshman and sophomore years were spent learning the basics of Social Justice and how we can implement it in our everyday life. We learned basic ideas of justice, such as standing up when we see someone being mistreated, learning how to treat others fairly and living up to our high school's motto, “Men for Others.” As I became an upperclassman, the focus shifted from using Social Justice in our everyday life to using it in the world around us.

Social Justice became much more than how we acted amongst our friends and family – it became how we seek to change the world around us for the better. Standing up against human rights violations, starvation, oppression and the killing of innocent people were some of the things we discussed in the classroom. However, just like anything one may learn in school, it is not how you apply what you have learned in the classroom but how you use it in the world around you.

Jesuit High School offered its students many opportunities to use their knowledge of Social Justice. Trips to Chiapas and Tijuana, Mexico, were offered – for us to go work in these communities and learn about people. There were also events the school put on to learn about Social Justice in the rest of the world. Groups who worked in struggling communities around the world came to speak of their experiences; speakers who organized peaceful movements for change came to speak to the entire
school. One such speaker was Father Roy Bourgeois.

Father Roy is the head of a group called the School of the Americas (SOA) Watch. The group is made up of people who for years have called for the closing of a military school now called The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Father Roy talked about the atrocities that students of the SOA committed and the numerous human rights violations they had carried out as a part of their training by the United States military. The main violation Father Roy discussed was the killing of six Jesuit Priests, their housekeeper and her daughter outside their house in El Salvador. Not only were they murdered, they were murdered in such a way as to send a message to the opposition that if anyone spoke out against the new government, they would meet the same fate. The images Father Roy showed and the speech he gave still stay with me today.

Months after Father Roy had visited, a trip was offered by Jesuit High School to attend a rally put on by the SOA Watch at Fort Benning, Georgia, where WHINSEC is located. This protest is the essential part of a weekend long event with thousands of people coming to join in the protest of the SOA. Trip organizers took my classmates and me to many different events, including speeches from victims whose family members had been killed by SOA graduates, group discussions with other students from around the country about Social Justice issues and even to a panel discussion with WHINSEC leadership to hear their side in this conflict.

Nothing has stayed with me more during that trip than the protest itself. Thousands of people from all walks of life had gathered at the gates of Fort Benning. Anyone from grandparents to children, to college students, to soldiers and even celebrities and politicians had all come to support this cause. Symbolic images that people carried helped bring solidarity between everyone at the event. Everyone carried white crosses in their hands with names of victims of the SOA written on them. The leaders of the rally would sing the names of the victims over the loud speakers. Every time a name was read off, the entire crowd would sing one word: “Presente!” Presente is Spanish for “present.” The protest was a way to remind everyone that the victims were present with the protesters in spirit on that day. As this is
going on, everyone is marching in what is called the funeral procession. This procession is lead by people dressed in black with a blank white mask, carrying coffins symbolically representing a funeral for the victim. Everyone involved follows this and lays their white crosses on the chain-linked fence in front of Fort Benning. By the end of the protest, the entire gate is covered in crosses. The site was one of remembrance while also being a powerful image of strength for the movement.

After being a part of that protest, I began to realize how much time and energy it takes to make change: change does not happen instantly. The SOA Watch has been doing this protest for more than twenty years, and yet the fight to close the school wages on. Despite this, people never lose hope that one day they will see the school close for good. I will admit that the fact that change has yet to come is part of the reason why I lost touch with the movement for so long.

That is the frustrating part about Social Justice: it is never easy. The thing that brings me back though are to see people who fight for it every day of their life. People like Father Roy whose goal in life is to seek justice or Almudena Bernabeu, the lawyer behind the trials of many of the leaders who authorized these human rights violations, including many of the men behind the killings of the six Jesuit Priests. Seeing Almudena speak at Cosumnes River College last year reignited the passion I had right after the protest. I looked up everything I could find on the movement and where it has come since I was last involved. People who live Social Justice are the reason I believe in it so heavily.

The movement against the SOA was the first time I was a part of a movement to try and change a wrong in our world. The challenge of seeking Social Justice is something that I have carried into all facets of my life including my education. My major is now International Relations and the ideas of Social Justice that I have experienced at Jesuit High School have carried over into my field of study. International Relations to me has become more than just understanding how countries and cultures operate. It is the study in how oppression still lives in a world that is becoming more connected each day. It is understanding the hardships of a people that have experienced so much pain and oppression. It is putting yourself into another person's shoes and seeing how they see the world.
Jesuit High School sets many goals for its students when they first are accepted. However, the most important is whatever you may do in life, do it in service of others. When I see people like Father Roy and Almudena, who have given of their own lives for justice, it calls me to do the same as well. Although I am aware of how hard the struggle to find Social Justice is, it is worth it.