



“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963*

I think that I was born a thermostat – someone who questions and tries to “transform the mores of society.” I was two years old when my family moved from Indiana to Virginia in the 1950’s. I have very few memories of my life then but one stands out. When I was three years old, I asked my mother to help me get a drink of water from a fountain. She told me that I couldn’t drink from that fountain because it was for “coloreds only.” To my young child brain that just didn’t seem right. I asked so many questions that my mother finally told me to just stop talking.

Through the years, that memory but more importantly that feeling has stayed with me. I was the child who made friends with anyone that was being mistreated - poor children, children with lower intelligence, children who looked different from the majority, even the boy in my class who smelled because his family didn’t have running water. I kept remembering how sad it felt to not be able to drink where I wanted to. I kept asking questions but no one could give me a good answer as to why everyone was not treated with respect.

When it came time to choose a career, I chose social work. I had never met a social worker and my family was far from pleased. But, I was determined. By this time, we were

living in a small town in Ohio. Really my only encouragement that I had not completely lost my mind came from reading the speeches of men like Martin Luther King, Jr.

When Dr. King was murdered, I was angry. It was about more than Jonne Dunne's "Every man's death diminishes me." It was an outrage at the injustice and I couldn't understand why other people in my environment didn't feel it at the intensity that I was feeling it.

I went to college and then got a Master of Social Work degree. I started working and I began to see injustices on a daily basis. Why were we giving the poor barely enough to live on and then judging them for not being successful? Why were we putting a teenage boy in jail because he stole a coat to keep warm? Why did the attorney in court automatically assume that my client was a prostitute? How did her being black figure in to that? Why could the street gangs give children a sense of belonging and acceptance that they couldn't get in greater society?

This became a passion for me. My friends started calling me Doña Quixote. I decided that I had to do more than just advocate for individual clients. I started challenging injustice where I saw it. When a friend recently sent me an e-mail with what was supposed to be a joke about Arabs, I wrote her that this was insulting. She stopped emailing me. When my city was going to build a Hooters restaurant, I wrote my elected representatives about the cost of institutional sexism. They built the restaurant anyway. When I had the opportunity to be on a city-wide task force to look for ways to reduce the crime from the street gangs, I refused unless citizens who had been or were street gang members were included. Why were their ideas not wanted?

I decided that one way to fight injustice was to prove its costs in ways that more people could hear. I was fortunate to be selected for the doctoral program at the Mandel School of

Nancy A. Amos, Ph.D. Candidate
Graduate School – MSASS
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Applied Social Sciences. At the same time, I have been teaching at a small private university. I had to focus and so am working on a dissertation that aims to look at some of biases against adolescent mothers.

I am dedicated to helping my students understand how “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere.” Why do my African-American students have to think about whether they should put activities in traditional black organizations on their resumes because it may hurt their job chances? How can we give students from impoverished school districts the help that they need to compete with students from wealthy high schools. At one point, I was asked to talk to students from poorer high schools about alternate careers because they “just aren’t doing the academic work.” I refused and am working to put in the supports that those students need to succeed.

The incidences of injustice are often subtle and often woven into the culture. I pay a price for questioning those injustices. People tell me to stop asking so many questions. Sometimes they tell me to stop talking. But, I have been asking those questions since I was three years old. And I think that that is what thermostats do. For me, the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is about confronting injustice – not only racial injustice but also any injustice that demeans or compromises the dignity of anyone. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life tells me that I am on the right track.