

Reflective Essay

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The line, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” will forever be connected in my mind with this quote by Martin Niemöller:

First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Humans instinctively “other” ourselves all the time, and there are plenty of reasons we separate ourselves into categories based on perceived differences. First, it makes us feel included as we belong to an “in-group.” Second, our human resources, including our empathy, are finite. We can only care so much, and it makes sense and makes us feel safe to care more about people we think are like us. Third, this keeps us close to and invested in our families, communities, and geographic loyalties that give us stability instead of exhausting ourselves and the resources at our disposal in the fight against injustice everywhere.

On the other hand, being able to psychologically dissociate ourselves from another group of people so completely as to allow and cause horrendous things to happen to people, as in the holocaust, is terrible and hard to comprehend. The balance between caring for and becoming an advocate against injustices that do not directly affect me and maintaining boundaries and self-care to be ethical and competent as a social worker is a dilemma I will not pretend to have figured out. Through this class and in becoming a policy advocate, I have learned that you can not advocate for issues you know nothing about. The first step is taking the time to connect with people whose struggles are different from yours is hearing their stories. By engaging with the people around us, we change our internal narrative from us versus them to our collective story

and struggle. What affects you affects me because I know you. I care about you. Knowing other people is the crucial first step to effective policy advocacy.

This class has made me reevaluate what I can do in policy. Although it also makes sense not to care if you can not do anything about a problem, it is harder not to get involved once you have realized there is plenty you can do. I will take the policy advocacy tools I have learned in this class with me as I work with various populations as a social worker and in my life as a citizen. Policy advocacy means standing up for what I believe in when I vote, communicating about matters that are important to me with my representatives on local and state levels, and working for policies in my community that benefit people who might not have the tools to advocate for themselves yet. Policy advocacy supports and empowers individuals and communities to advocate for themselves.

We are part of a collective whole in our families, communities, and societies, and I like the last line of the quote that was the prompt for this essay. "For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you out to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is how it is structured." I believe God made this universe and structured not only the physical aspects of our cosmos but also the psychological laws that govern us. And being interconnected, social creatures is how He made us. This design is not always convenient. I would much rather be what I am supposed to be and worry about problems that only affect me, but this is not how the world works; it is not how my soul works. Because of this, I will continue to strive to be what I ought, so you can be what you ought. I will continue to engage in policies not only because they affect me but because they affect you.

I have heard it said that social work is a transformative degree as much as or more than an informational one. This class has informed me and transformed my perspective on myself as a policy advocate and how I view the world through the policies around me.