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Justice and the Lens of History

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Justice and the Lens of History

One of my happiest moments was when a former student told me that I had ruined her life.

In the early days of retirement, every college professor reflects and wants to believe they made a difference for the students who came through their classrooms during their career. Sometimes the students take the time to tell us. One of my students told me—joyfully—that I ruined things for her because she now sees herself in a way that makes it impossible to have the same conversations with family and friends that she used to have before she took my class. Something changed in her forever. What changed? She now sees herself in history, and she cannot un-see herself in this way.

In the spring of 2004, the Kansas Health Foundation gave me the opportunity to hear Bill Grace, the founder of the Center for Ethical Leadership. That day, in Wichita, Kansas, Bill Grace asked the question that would shape the rest of my teaching career and my purpose in life.

Where are you in history?

Until then, my career had been largely theoretical, teaching concepts from textbooks. Bill Grace's question helped me frame the study of leadership as a way for my students to see their places in the world and in history. Specifically, I began to use examples of protest and civil unrest to challenge students to see that history provides a perspective on current struggles for justice.

I became a Professor of Being on the Right Side of History.

Every current struggle for justice has a context. Issues of injustice are not unique to a moment, born completely from immediate circumstance. There is always historical context for any injustice, and there are always historical patterns indicating where the struggle will lead. Yet, I did not simply connect the dots to that past for my students. My approach was to personalize current events as history 30 years from now.

What will history say about where you stood on particular issues of justice as you lived through them? What answer will you give your grandchildren when they ask you about it?

My students were brought to understand that admiring Martin Luther King, Jr. today is easy. By contrast, a student sitting in Albertson Hall in 1965 most likely despised him, holding the majority view that he was a Communist. A lawbreaker. An outside agitator who often seemed connected to pickets and strikes, riots and property damage. We can see a tragic response to King's moment in the jeering, screaming faces of local resistance to the protests of the day. The angry people in the background (the majority) turned out to be on the wrong side of history.

Be careful where you stand.

More recently, I told my students that someday there would be statues of Colin Kaepernick throughout the United States. When the laughter in the room died down, we began to explore the

story of John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics. The image of their silent Black Power protest on the medalist podium is iconic today. I showed my students the 22-foot sculpture on the campus of San Jose State University. It is also a statue for Peter Norman, the White Australian silver medalist who stood in solidarity with Carlos and Smith, even loaning them his black gloves to wear in their salutes. Norman declined depiction in the sculpture, leaving his historic place on the stand empty, so others can stand today and photograph themselves in solidarity more than 50 years later. The protest is easy to support now, but it was an incredibly unpopular position for all three of the athletes in 1968. Thus, I cautioned students that if you are with the majority in an unpopular question of justice, it should make you nervous. Thirty years from now, you will be accountable.

“Curt, keep the faith, John Lewis.”

I retired from teaching in 2019. Like millions, I watched the massive street protests in cities across the country when the 8 minute, 46 second death of George Floyd became a viral moment that launched a racial reckoning in the United States earlier this year. Like millions, I watched the funeral and public commemoration of Congressman John Lewis when he passed away this summer. In this moment of deep, sometimes violent division in our public life over the future of our country, I found inspiration and hope. Last year, another former student passed a personal note to me from Congressman Lewis which read, “Curt, keep the faith, John Lewis.” Sir, I have, and I will.

In retirement, however, I am also aware that I am really no longer part of the story of higher education and justice. I no longer have the opportunity for students to come into my classroom each year. So, I find myself thinking about what I want to tell higher education professionals about my hopes for the opportunities they still have.

Our democracy and the classroom.

I hope teachers, administrators, program coordinators, and even governing boards will think about their own place in history. Thirty years from now, what will be the story of your own commitments during this time and times to come? Will you teach only for professional certification and to secure employment? We should teach students to embrace the accountability of their own commitments and their own places in history. Higher education has a role in the progress of social life and the dismantling of oppressive structures. Higher education will be accountable 30, 50, 100 years from now. As our society reckons with so many issues of injustice, perhaps even the ongoing commitment to the values and institutions of democracy itself, crucial work remains for higher education. It is the work of teaching, researching, and programming toward justice. When students come for an education, the institution must stand in ways that stand the test of history.

What side of history will you be on?

Author



Dr. Curt Brungardt, is Professor Emeritus of Leadership Studies at Fort Hays State University (FHSU) in Hays, KS. His 33-year career in higher education included various administrative roles and as a faculty member teaching both political science and leadership studies. Most recently, Dr. Brungardt was the Omer G. Voss Distinguished Professor of Leadership Studies and the Director of the Center for Civic Leadership. In addition to being the creator of the FHSU Department of Leadership Studies, and the co-founder of the Center for Civic Leadership, he specialized in the academic work of political leadership, social justice, and community organizing. Curt has authored and co-authored several books and numerous articles in the field of leadership development and civic engagement. He is recognized nationally for his work in the area of Social Change Leadership Theory.

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