



Reflections

Striving for Social Justice: A Historical Reflection

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I have been engaged in adult educational work for over 40 years and for the past 23 years I have been fortunate to serve on the faculty at the University of Georgia (UGA). This privilege has been something of a process to close a circle. You see, my mother's family is from Augusta, Georgia. They were part of the great northern migration that began in the early decades of the 20th century. My grandparents, Louis and Ellen Carter, raised a family at a time when neither they nor their children could attend UGA. Jim Crow segregation foreclosed the opportunity to attend the state's premiere institution of higher education. All but one of my mother's brothers and sisters left Georgia seeking a better life because they just could not imagine one living in Georgia. It was some 50 years later in 1961 that UGA was finally desegregated--well beyond my grandparents' lifetimes. My grandparents were fiercely committed to education and instilled that value in all of their children. My mother eventually attended West Virginia State University in the 1920s. My mother and father passed along the imperative to pursue education. Among four children, three of us hold doctorates and the fourth possessed a master's degree. My sisters and brother and I realized the accomplishments that my grandparents imagined for their children. Now some 100 years after my grandparents lived in Augusta, we are living the dream that they could only imagine.

There is a lesson in this for adult educators working for social justice. What this says is that structural change that creates social justice is often beyond the view of people who work for it. Market-driven forces support a technicist, instrumentalist version of adult education. Baptiste (1999) called on adult educators to refocus on matters of serious and tragic human circumstances and to engage in efforts toward civically responsible change. Over a decade and a half has passed since Baptiste's (1999) call to action. The time seems ripe for a renewed view to commit to the practice of social justice. This seems especially timely given the vast economic inequality that characterizes modern global capitalism. Threats to peaceful, progressive living are reflected in the rise of movements such as "Black Lives Matter". The threat terrorism and the rise of radical Islam create an environment where many people feel insecure and uncertain about the future and doubtful of their capacity to remedy the situation.

In this broad context, it is timely to reflect on the possibilities for adult education to confront these big issues. It is worth noting that, as overwhelming and monumental as these current challenges seem, social justice activists and educators have confronted challenges no less daunting in the past. I draw on two examples of adult education for social justice that envisioned a just and better social world; but neither of the examples actually survived to realize the better world they envisioned.

The Brookwood Labor College: Advocating the Rights of Working People

The Brookwood Labor College (Altenbaugh, 1983) was founded in 1921 as a way to educate workers and their families about American capitalism and workers' rights. Between 1914 and 1921, a number of adult education and training organizations were founded to serve the American labor movement. Adult education was considered by many labor organizations to be an effective weapon in combating the evils of capitalism. Brookwood Labor College was a kind of private school for workers, dedicated to meet the needs of working men and women as well as their children. Although it was named "college", many of the workers had limited schooling.

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The curriculum was developed to teach learners about the community in which they lived. A key feature of the school was that students were asked to handle the business affairs of the school. Although Brookwood became embroiled in disputes of the governance of the school and its commitment to radical unionism, it offered workers and their families an opportunity to grow and develop as a step toward countering the oppression experienced at the hand of their bosses in the factories. Brookwood was forced to close its doors in 1937 as a result of eroding financial support.

Brookwood Labor College and its leaders envisioned a society in which workers had a reasonable portion of control over their lives. The legal and policy reforms in the 1930s and 1940s that provided for collective bargaining and other protections for workers ended up beyond the life and action of Brookwood. While it would be an overstatement to suggest that Brookwood Labor College had a major hand in realizing the gains earned for the labor movement a decade or two later, it is necessary to recognize the work of Brookwood as an adult education agency for social justice that represented an important milestone in the labor movement's quest for better working conditions for working men and women.

Ida B. Wells: The Anti-Lynching Movement

At the turn of the 20th century, white violence against blacks had reached a fever pitch. The lynching of black men and women became routine throughout the South. Tuskegee University documented lynching and recorded nearly 3500 such events between 1890 and 1968 (Tuskegee University Archives). Ida B. Wells became a renowned activist who exposed the violence through her work as an activist, speaker, writer, and publisher. As a prominent leader of the anti-lynching movement, she attempted to persuade government officials to adopt legislation and policy to end lynching. Despite her valiant efforts, lynching continued until well into the mid-century.

Wells' commitment arose from the bitter experience of seeing three of her friends being lynched. She vowed to combat the practice of lynching through her work in two newspapers of which she was the owner. Using the power of the spoken and written word, she published the results of her research documenting the number, brutality, and unjust lynching of African Americans by whites. Her audience included churches, women's clubs, as well as a general readership of her newspapers.

Ida B. Wells was also one of the organizers of what became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Partly as a result of her pioneering advocacy and research, a special committee of the NAACP was formed to advocate for anti-lynching legislation. However, her

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career focused on the injustice of white brutality and this led her to oppose one of the most prominent African Americans of the day, Booker T. Washington, and his strategy of accommodation to Southern white supremacy.

Not only was Wells an effective communicator in the written word, she also traveled the country and throughout Europe speaking to groups about lynching. Her efforts stimulated the formation of other groups such as the Women's Loyal Union of

New York and Brooklyn (Peterson, 2011). Not considered an educator as such, her speeches and writings were highly informative and led to the sway of public opinion against lynching that eventually led to the passage of anti-lynching legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1922. Despite the fact that more than 200 anti-lynching bills were introduced in Congress, full passage never succeeded due to the successful blockage in the Senate by the Southern bloc of Senators. It was not until 2005, however, that the Senate adopted a resolution apologizing for its failure to approve anti-lynching legislation (Holloway, 2014).

Ida B. Wells continued her fight for social justice until her death in 1931. During her lifetime and for years afterward, lynching persisted although the number of lynchings dwindled gradually in the 1960s. Her persistence, commitment and dogged determination were the hallmark of striving for social justice. Never discouraged or distracted from her mission she stood strong until the end of her life to inform the world about the injustice being committed on American soil.

Conclusion

The story of the Brookwood Labor College and the life work of Ida B. Wells and the anti-lynching movement give poignant testimony to the difficulties and stresses of working for social justice. In today's world, beset with so many difficulties, stories of activists and educators like these help provide perspective and inspiration to carry on the battle for social justice. Adult education has an important role to play. While we may not, as individuals, see the fruits of our labors, we should be confident, as I am sure my grandparents were when they insisted on pursuing education, that one day we will see a better world. My siblings and I are the heirs to their efforts. Adult educators have many such examples—I have provided just two here—with which to encourage those committed to social justice and to continue the struggle, even when the change seems remote or impossible. How do I know this? Our history tells us so.

References

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Biography



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His research has focused on a historical analysis of the African American experience in adult education with a focus on the early 20th century. He is interested in the multicultural responses to oppression in the African American experience. A particular focus has been the representation of race and gender through media and pop culture and the critical educational responses to those representations.