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Bridging the Divide: Social Justice and Understanding Differences Through Writing

Writing is an important platform for social justice because it provides a place to share experiences, challenge systems, call for change, and open a dialogue between different walks of life. When reading the writings of people separate from ourselves we discover a way of life other than the one we were born into. We learn about the struggles people with differing identities face daily and why they yearn for change. Writing offers a way to express instances in which oppression occurs, and for those reading to realize the ways in which they may experience privilege. Writing provides a place for people to convey their feelings and attitudes towards the way our society currently functions and what they think needs to change in order for our society to become more just. Often times, writing that is centered around social justice can be seen as advice. We can see this in Ta-Nehisi Coates *A Letter To My Son*, James Baldwin's "A Talk To Teachers", and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should all be Feminists*. Though these writings are all very different, they all offer advice, indirectly and directly through a series of personal experiences and opinions that have the power to bridge the divide between differing social groups.

One of the most powerful things writings can do for social justice is to bring attention to the awful, gritty experiences that are often ignored. Although people like to hear hopeful speeches that inspire change, the most important part of social justice is recognizing and understanding the problems that require action. Literature provides a place to share personal

stories that highlight the key issues in society that affect marginalized groups. In *Letter to my Son*, Coates discusses the reality of men destroying black bodies with little reason, but he does not believe that these instances are special:

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment, The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. This legacy aspires to the shackling of black bodies. It is hard to face this. (5)

Coates used his writing to bring attention to how society treats black bodies as unimportant. Instead of blaming racist acts on the individuals who committed them, he saw these acts as the result of a nation that was built on the backs of black bodies coupled with a society that still does not treat black people as equals. His writing was not optimistic or encouraging, yet through stories about his life readers see a new interpretation of our society that uncovers the brutal realities that many black people face. His intended audience was his son, but his message could reach every other young black boy out there leaving them with the idea to live their lives “determined to struggle” (29).

Adichie also used writing to bring attention to the oppression women face in *We Should All Be Feminists*. Her purpose was to provide evidence for the disparities between men and women for those who believe that women do not ever struggle because they are women, and men do not get things because they are men. She did so by telling a series of stories about her life that describe instances in which she faced discrimination for being a women. Many of the stories involve things that may seem normal, or innocent, such as this everyday occurrence:

Each time I walk into a Nigerian restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man and ignores me. The waiters are a product of a society that has taught them that men are more important than women, and I know that they don't intend harm, but it is one thing to know something intellectually and quite another to feel it emotionally. Each time they ignore me, I feel invisible. (20)

Both Adichie and Coates wrote about times where people did things that were racist or sexist yet they weren't outside the norm. Although Coates example of black bodies being destroyed is much more extreme than a woman being ignored, both of these situations happened because of societal expectations. Black men are killed out of an overreaction because they were expected to do something worse. Men are thanked for tips even if a woman gives them because they are expected to provide the money. Adichie and Coates used their writing and experiences to draw attention to the underlying problem, which isn't the individual people who commit these acts, but society as a whole.

Writing not only gives power to the person who shares their story, but also to everyone who reads it and can relate in some way. There is comfort in knowing that someone shares experiences with you, and there is strength in discovering the ways in which other people have overcome or challenged difficulties that you have also faced. In "A Talk To Teachers", James Baldwin describes the point in his life when he decided that he would not be defined by the expectations and labels white people placed on him. He goes on to imagine what he would teach young men like him if he were a teacher. He would teach them that the world is criminal and intent on destroying them, and they "must at once decide that [they] are stronger than this conspiracy and that [they] must never make [their] peace with it" (682,683). We could easily

assume that Coates found strength and comfort in Baldwin's writing because he passed the same advice down to his son in his writing. In his letter he tells his son to be himself despite what others expect of him, and he asks him to live his life determined to struggle and to not make peace with the way things are. Both of these men wrote these pieces to give advice in some way and they likely gave young black men who read it a sense of power over their own lives.

One of the biggest effects writing has on social justice is its ability to persuade people who are unsure that there really is a problem. Often, the most convincing arguments aren't statistics or facts, but true stories that prove that racism, sexism, and any other form of discrimination still exists. Social Justice writings are most beneficial to the type of people who are privileged enough to have never seen any sort of discrimination, or have only seen it on rare occasions. Reading personal accounts can be eye opening to people who think racism or sexism is wrong, but do not believe that they are things that still exist today. Adichie describes a very progressive friend she has who held these beliefs. It was not until he witnessed an act of sexism towards Adichie that he finally realized that these were the kinds of things she and other women had to face daily (16). In this case he was able to observe this in person, but many of the awful things that happen to women and black people everyday go unnoticed. When we can not see what is happening, it is easy to think there is not a problem. This is why writing is so important to social justice, because those stories often provide the spark that leads to change.

Most importantly, writing opens a dialogue between different walks of life. It allows for oppressed groups to find solace in similar stories, and it allows for those with privilege to learn about a part of society they may never see. Writing creates a bridge between differing groups of people by forming a homogenous understanding of privilege and oppression between groups

who experience those things differently. Coates tells a story in his letter about a time when a white woman laid a hand on his son but he was powerless to protect him. White people controlled his black body. They could have gotten him sent to jail leaving his son without a father, so he had to just walk away. But if we consider a white woman in this situation, she would be expected to stand up for her child, even praised. That is what you do as a parent. Coates indirectly used his writing to reveal a double standard for parents of different races. So hopefully when people read his writing they realize the extra struggles black fathers face, and they see that it needs to change.

When we use writing as a platform for social justice it bridges communities by solidifying a similar understanding of society throughout all diverse groups. It creates a new way to look at situations, a perspective which can only be attained through understanding the differences in the way society treats specific groups. Writing gives a voice to those without one, and gives people the power and strength they need to step away from society's expectations. It unveils the reality of life for marginalized groups that is all too often ignored and inspires many to work for change. Most importantly, writing gives everyone the opportunity to be heard.

Citations

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We should all be Feminists*.

Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America, 1998.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*.

