

Vignettes on the Path to Social Justice Awareness: A Professor/Musician's Responsibility

By

Penny Prince

Lehman College, City University of New York

Abstract

This article traces experiences and influences in the author's life as a musician and educator which led her to take social justice action at her college. Through personal narrative, examples from her years teaching music to elementary through graduate level students, and research of "ban the box" practices at universities, she analyzes her growing sense of awareness and accountability, and details strategies to model social justice for her students. Questions include: What is the artist's responsibility? How can matters of social consciousness be approached in the music curriculum? How is the author's college responding to the social justice initiative of one professor?

Keywords: criminal justice system, social justice, vignette, responsibility

Vignettes

I remember practicing the piano when I was very, very young, perhaps 7, with the idea in my mind that every single note on the page must be cared about and considered. If I left out one note or played a wrong note, I felt compelled to add the correct note to the next measure. I had to be accountable for everyone. I could not ignore it. (This made for some very interesting tone clusters.) Later, this became a critical feature in my memorization technique: I analyzed every line of the music as well as the intervals between the notes, so that each and every one was understood in the context of the whole. Perhaps this originated with my masterful piano teacher Zenon Fishbein, who encouraged me to find the beauty in every piece I played: Each note was put there for a reason by the composer, he said, and it was my duty to uncover its purpose and beauty. Perhaps this compulsion originated from a pivotal experience I had in elementary school, when my teacher called another girl and me up to his desk. I went up, but he only addressed the other girl, telling her she had been accepted to some special program. I will never know if I had misheard my name that day or if the teacher was simply ignoring me, but the feeling of being unacknowledged and overlooked became intertwined in my psyche with the determination to leave no musical note by the wayside. Indeed, to this day, when I direct actors in my musicals (I compose and direct collaborative musical theatre works in which the casts cowrite the scripts. The casts write every word; therefore, every word is included by choice), I tell them the audience must hear any word they utter. There must be no asides or whispers inaudible to the audience. If a line is not important, it should not be in the script, and so every word is worthy of hearing. This affects my attitude when I am speaking with a group of people too. I am intensely aware of whether everyone is being included in the conversation, and for this reason, I teach all my classes in a circle so that each participant may be seen and heard.

I grew up on an all white street in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York. The first time a neighbor sold his house to an African American family, the block went into a panic, except for my family. When the new neighbors moved in, I remember my mother buying a box of candy and taking me next door and ringing the bell. Mrs. Gittens answered the door and my mom said, “Sweets to the sweet. Welcome.” We soon became dear friends with this family who had a daughter just my age. A few months later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was slain, and again, we went next door and cried and hugged each other. These incidents spoke volumes to me about sensitivity, acknowledgment, and doing the right thing.

I remember teaching music to a third-grade class and being interrupted by a fire drill. I accompanied my students downstairs and out to the street where we waited next to a special education class with children in wheelchairs and helmets for encephalitis. One of my students said, “Eeww, I don’t want to stand with them.” When we returned to the music classroom, I told the children we were not going back to music as usual. There was something even more important to talk about: how we treat each other. We went on to have a 20-minute discussion about bullying and hurting each other, and then, when their classroom teacher arrived, we discussed what had transpired and we all decided to write a musical about tolerance and sensitivity. The 10-week process of writing our play and performing it turned this class around! Our play *Tolerance* had a script written by the children with my music and lyrics. It told the story of a school class in which the boys did not allow the girls to play baseball, and the girls teased one of their peers for only being interested in her violin. It turned out the boys needed new uniforms and the violinist needed the next size violin and they collectively worked out a way to support one another and achieve all their goals. By the end, the classroom teacher and I noticed bonding and a decency the students had toward one another we had not observed before.

Several years back, I remember going to a grocery store and waiting in line behind a family with a very large order. When the cashier finally finished totaling up, the father angrily said, "Forget it. Get in the car." His wife and child looked next to tears as they followed him out. They just could not afford it and I feared for the scene that would follow in their car on the way home. Would he be yelling at his wife? Would their child be crying and ashamed? I felt awful for days that I had not immediately stepped up and paid their bill. I was able to afford it. I should have run after them and said I would pay, but I was too slow to act, and they drove away.

Two years ago, I remember walking through the Lehman College campus and spotting a young woman who looked tearful and frustrated. I stopped and asked if I could help. She said she was a transfer student and this was the day she had come to get all her classes approved, but she was being shunted from office to office. No one was taking the responsibility to help her. She was ready to give up. I said I would help. I brought her to the Dean of Continuing Education, who graciously and kindly dedicated her assistant to stay with this young lady and help her until everything was settled. This experience eventually led me to see the need for a group of Navigators who would help lost or new students or anyone else in need on our campus.

Around this time, I attended a meeting at Lehman in which a new admissions website was being rolled out. The template for the admissions application contained the question, "Were you ever convicted of a crime?" I was shocked to see this, because I thought every person had the right to an education, and there ought to be no impediment to earning an education for any qualified individual. I brought up this concern at the meeting, and a heated discussion ensued. Misinformation abounded about who was eligible for admissions, for teaching certification, for nursing and other professions. Happily, the campaign to "ban the box" was successfully resolved

around this time, and this question no longer appears on the City University of New York, or many other, college applications.

In great part due to my daughter Elly's advocacy for the rights of the incarcerated (she cofounded an organization called Ballots Over Bars, which fights for the rights of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to be able to vote; www.emancipationinitiative.org/), I joined the City University Faculty Senate Committee on Higher Education in the Prisons, to educate myself about relevant practices in New York. I learned that college programs in prisons have been proven to be the key factor in lowering recidivism rates; that men and women who enter college after prison are known to be serious, committed, motivated students who seek a new chance in life. I learned that prisons in New York do not permit computer access, and teaching in the prisons requires ingenious strategies since materials, computers, even textbooks are either not allowed or carefully screened. I learned that when one is in prison, debts such as student loans and child support continue to accrue, so someone may be released owing thousands and thousands of dollars. Probably the main obstacles criminal justice-affected people face are stigma and ignorance regarding the laws and regulations for fair housing, hiring and admissions.

Here are some true-or-false statements people are often confused about:¹

1. People who have been convicted of a felony are automatically barred from employment requiring licensure.
2. Over 100,000 New York City school children are affected by the criminal justice system.
3. A person with a criminal record is not eligible to receive federal student financial aid or Pell grants.

4. People who are incarcerated are not expected to pay back student loans until they are released and have found employment.

Taking Action

The preceding pivotal vignettes convinced me as an associate professor at Lehman College that I had to take action. I was determined that in addition to my teaching, my responsibility included making our community stronger and better than I found it. So in 2017, realizing that the formerly incarcerated population must not be ignored or left to fend for itself, I decided to take this cause to my campus. I addressed the Lehman Senate about the urgency of establishing a reentry committee to give everyone a fair shot at education and to make our community more informed, welcoming, and supportive. The reaction was incredible. Many people present were totally supportive of my proposal; a couple of professors were not. One woman in the Senate asked, “Does that mean we will have rapists on campus?” I responded that when someone has served their time, they deserve a chance at a new chapter in life. (I have since learned that sex offenders have the most difficult backgrounds to overcome in society, and may be the one group that often does not gain admission to schools.) I understand that this professor may have had a traumatic incident in her life that led her to ask such a question, but rapists can appear in any environment; to think of all formerly incarcerated people as a threat to oneself or more of a threat than any other member of the community is statistically incorrect.

Since my announcement at Senate, we have formed a reentry committee at Lehman comprising professors, administrators, staff, and students, including formerly incarcerated students. We have 33 regular members and have held two big events with over 300 people attending: In 2018, we hosted an event with Rehabilitation Through the Arts (www.rta-arts.org), an organization that sends artist teachers into prisons to work on and mount full length theatre

productions with incarcerated people. Many graduates of this program continue this work once they leave prison. In 2019, we sponsored the showing of an award winning short documentary by Gilda Brasch, *Let My People Vote*, about the struggles of formerly incarcerated people working to reclaim their voting rights (www.letmypeoplevotemovie.com). We hosted a Lehman Navigator's training session, assembling representatives from every department at Lehman including admissions, continuing education, student affairs, counseling, and security and training volunteers on campus to act as point people for any visitor or new student in need. We created a PowerPoint presentation to educate and inform every department of the needs of the students who may choose not to self-identify, and relevant rules and best practices. Last summer, we won a THRIVE grant from the College and Community Fellowship (www.collegeandcommunity.org), a wonderful organization that assists formerly incarcerated women with enrollment and tuition. The THRIVE grant gave my committee members 3 days of training, on everything from trauma awareness, current regulations, financial literacy, organizational support for change in our institution, and more.

In this paper, I have tried to trace my pathway to social justice awareness and action and my sense of responsibility and accountability as a member of the higher education community. With passion that stems both from personal experiences and from my training as a musician who cannot ignore a note once it is part of my consciousness, the hope is to continue these efforts in the community and in my personal life. I close with a song I composed for *When I Get to Where I'm Going*, my musical about the bus boycotts of 1955. The character singing this song is Virginia Durr, the Caucasian wife of Rosa Parks's attorney, who, after years of living in the segregated South and accepting its racist policies as normal, has the opportunity to live in Washington, D.C., for a while, and recognizes that these policies of segregation are not at all the

norm. She returns to Alabama with her husband, Clifford, and is determined never to go back to her old ways.

“You Can Live”

You can live your life in shadows thinking that’s the scope of the world,

Not letting anything new to come in.

You believe you live in comfort though it’s drafty and it’s gray,

Yet that’s the way it’s always been.

But the moment you feel sunshine, it casts a warming glow,

With rays and sparkling colors all around,

And you can’t go back, you know it,

Your shadow life is done,

You recognize your life of light’s begun. (Prince, 2018, track 05).

References

Prince, P. (2018). You can live 2018 [Recorded by Mariah Escobar]. On *When I get to where I'm going 2018* [YouTube playlist]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwzprPXh9aw>

¹ False, True, False, False. (www.csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/projects/mythbusters)

Penny Prince (PENNY.PRINCE@lehman.cuny.edu) is Assistant Professor of Music at Lehman College, City University of New York. She is the supervisor of music student teachers and interns at Lehman. She has devised curricula for several courses, including "Music in the Elementary School: Advanced Techniques," "Music in Early Childhood," and "Introduction to Structure and Literature." Dr. Prince received her BM and MM in piano from Manhattan School of Music, where she studied with Zenon Fishbein. Dr. Prince earned her PhD in Music Education from NYU Steinhardt in 2009 and was awarded the Jewish Foundation for the Education of Women's 125th Year Fellowship.