

Social Justice 365-03

Spring 2004

Tuesday-Thursday, 11:00-12:12 p.m.

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Office Hour: By appointment (don't be shy)

Course Epigraphs

Don't mourn. Organize. -- Mother Jones, USA

You would see that we don't need much to be happy -- a piece of wood on four bricks for a bed, a thin foam mattress, a sleeping bag and a light blanket, several boxes for our files, and a lot of breathing in and out consciously to be aware of our good luck to be in peace and liberty to work for those in need.

-- Chân Không, Vietnam

Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy, rotten system. -- Dorothy Day, USA

There's an endless amount of work to do on behalf of a number of worthy causes, though "causes" isn't even the appropriate word. "Worthy lives" -- the lives of rivers, dolphins, abused children, refugees, oppressed peoples anywhere." -- Anne Waldman, USA

The only thing worth globalizing is dissent. . . -- Arundhati Roy, India

Go for the jugular. -- Natalie Goldberg, USA

Truly I've learned more theology in poor neighborhoods than in classrooms. At times I wonder if the questions of traditional theology have any meaning for the poor. And "the poor" here means eighty percent of the population! -- Ivone Gebara, Brazil

A genuine feminist politics always brings us from bondage to freedom, from lovelessness to loving. Mutual partnership is the foundation of love. -- bell hooks, USA

You can not be creative in a system that is very unjust, like the system we live in, unless you are a dissident. Because when you are creative you are for justice, for freedom, for love. It's by nature like that. You feel that you want to do something. You cannot accept injustice. You become angry, if this injustice is happening to you or to others. If you are walking in the street and you see children who are begging, beggars, who are starving, they are dying of hunger, what do you do? You become furious. You want to change the system that created this hunger. You discover it's not national only, it's international. -- Nawal el-Saadawi, Egypt

When I am with Palestinian friends I tend to be somewhat less horrified than when I am trying to act in a role of human rights observer, documenter, or direct-action resister. They are a good example of how to be in it for the long haul. I know that the situation gets to them -- and may ultimately get them -- on all kinds of levels, but I am nevertheless amazed at their strength in being able to defend such a large degree of their humanity -- laughter, generosity, family-time -- against the incredible horror occurring in their lives and against the constant presence of death. I felt much better after this morning. I spent a lot of time writing about the disappointment of discovering, somewhat first-hand, the degree of evil of which we are still capable. I should at least mention that I am also discovering a degree of strength and of basic ability for humans to remain human in the direst of circumstances --which I also haven't seen before. I think the word is dignity. I wish you could meet these people. Maybe, hopefully, someday you will. -- Rachel Corrie, USA

Every day we could think about the aggression in the world, in New York, Los Angeles, Halifax, Taiwan, Beirut, Kuwait, Somalia, Iraq, everywhere. All over the world, everybody always strikes out at the enemy, and the pain escalates forever. Each day we could reflect on this and ask ourselves, "Am I going to add to the aggression in the world?" Every day, at the moment when things get edgy, we can just ask ourselves, "Am I going to practice peace, or am I going to war?" -- Pema Chödrön, USA

Extended Course Description

Theology ought to assist ordinary people in deepening their faith commitment to a more abundant life. This theology course introduces the student to one major dimension of this work on behalf of greater life: the contemporary struggle of religious communities and movements to promote local and global justice and peace. In this class, we will focus on the perspectives, contributions, and experiences of a variety of women in these movements for social change.

This course is demanding in that it challenges the student to take a hard look at some grim realities, such as sexist oppression, white privilege, the global economy and sweatshops, U.S. urban and Third World poverty, consumerism and affluence, U.S. military intervention abroad, and homelessness in the richest country in the world. The course is likely to be unsettling as we raise critical questions about the U.S. economic and political system, American culture, the Catholic Church, and SLU, too. In past semesters, some students have confessed, "I leave this class with such a heavy heart."

Nevertheless, we will learn about and from women and men who embody the vital virtues of compassion, courage, nonviolence, and steadfastness, virtues which we, too, can cultivate in our daily lives. In addition to people like Natalie Goldberg, Dorothy Day, Starhawk, Cab Gutting, Liz Madden, Chân Không, Nhat Chi Mai, and bell hooks, some of the inspiring people we encounter will surely be students in this very course.

Here's what we are going to do:

1. We will deliberately leave our cozy comfort zones and insert ourselves into conflicts, troubles, hard times, and struggles. You can see what you are made of and see how sharp your university-educated mind is, how open your potentially infinitely open heart is, how enduring your body and guts and tear ducts are in the face of these struggles.
2. We will study such perennial practices of social justice devotees as the works of mercy, nonviolent direct action, human rights advocacy, prophetic criticizing and energizing, nurturance of community life, grass-roots organizing, the hermeneutics of generosity and suspicion, voluntary simplicity, civil disobedience, and political-spiritual solidarity. Acquainted with these practices, we can move in the direction of greater personal and communal empowerment.
3. We will take in distressing, disturbing, and disorienting testimonies of human rights workers, as to how the innocent are treated by the powerful and their minions – you ought to get sick to your stomach, a tear will be in order, a gasp is entirely appropriate. We need to know the tragic truths of our world.
4. We will engage in social analysis of the interrelationship of transnational corporations, the U.S. government, major media, and the military-industrial-academic complex, as well as the ways sexism, racism, and classism intersect. Jesus advised, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take that speck out of your eye,' while all the time the plank remains in your own?"
5. We will read a lot: memoirs, biographies, primers, manuals and chronicles of women who embody resurrection and resistance. We will also ponder ancient Scriptures and teachings embodied anew by practitioners of religious renewal, including the Bhagavad Gita (Hinduism), the Five Precepts (Buddhism), the Sermon on the Mount (Christianity), and the literature of the Hebraic prophets (Judaism). This deepening of our fund of examples, stories, images, and teachings, by continuing our religious formation, can aid us in the common project of social transformation.
6. We will take refuge in prayers, chants, meditations, silence, contemplations, litanies, and invocations from a variety of religious traditions; also, we will add poetry, blues, rock, and folk music to our proceedings, since learning should be holistic, affective, as well as rational. Moreover, we will also view documentary works of cinema and experience the power of visual narrative juxtaposed with our various textual testimonies.
7. In a spirit of hospitality, we will also welcome former students of this course, guests, honored activists and contemporary disciples, who are engaged in the struggle for social justice in and beyond Saint Louis. From their example, we may be encouraged to take the next step on our own journeys.

8. We will be invited to deepen our capacities for indignation and mindfulness, conscientiousness and compassion, critical analysis and alternative visions, all in the service of our practical responsibilities as spiritual visionaries and U.S. citizens. Marx's thesis on Feuerbach is still apt: "Philosophers have heretofore interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it." If you don't believe this, ask the children of Haiti, or the unemployed factory workers in Kentucky, or the campesinos in El Salvador, or the Palestinians still in refugee camps, or ...

Course Requirements

(1) Insertion

The best way to learn social justice is to engage in the struggle for it. So, first, ask yourself what issue of social justice concerns you – children in poverty, genocide in Tibet, the death penalty, workers' rights, police brutality, living wage jobs, discrimination toward immigrants, increased tuition at SLU, the policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the U.S. military budget, the protection of the environment, the extent of corporate welfare, the School of the Assassins, homophobia, the Middle East conflict, global warming, racial profiling, nuclear disarmament, domestic violence, homelessness, etc. Chances are that there is a group in the metropolitan area working on it. Second, pick an insertion site (or sites) and volunteer your time, energy, and intelligence over the course of the semester.

Here are some possibilities: ACLU, Amnesty International, Campus Kitchen, La Clinica, Habitat for Humanity, Inter-Faith Committee on Latin America, Karen House (Catholic Worker), SLU production of *The Vagina Monologues*, Our Lady's Inn, Students against Sweatshops, and Women's Safe House. Christy Finsel of SLU's Service Learning department will also be glad to assist you in making a wise choice.

The insertion has these two requirements: (1) a minimum of 35 (documented by a supervisor or group leader) hours working with the group and (2) a five-page journal synthesizing that insertion experience in light of the entire course.

A précis of the project -- a typed, half-page proposal for what you want to do -- must be handed in by the end of the fourth week of class! Students are encouraged to team up and work with other students in the class to make for a fun, rewarding experience as well as have someone to process the experiences throughout the semester. 30% of the grade.

(2) Journal

We have 15 weeks together and we will be learning a lot. You will keep a record of it by filling a notebook with your reflections, reactions, questions, complaints, dreams, descriptions, and connections. Natalie Goldberg will be our instructor here, so familiarize yourself with the six rules of writing practice on page 8 of her book, *Writing Down the Bones*.

Purchase a simple Mead Composition book -- 100 sheets, wide-ruled. We'll take time in class to do "writing practices" and plenty of suggestions will be offered for writing between classes to help the student reach the ambitious goal of finishing the entire notebook (in your normal handwriting, no exaggeratedly huge script to take up more space with fewer words, please). The only way not to get the full points is not to complete the pages. 25% of the grade. Thus,

25 points = 200 pages
24 points = 190
23 points = 180
22 points = 170, etc.

(3) Final Exam

I want students to be informed about these social justice exemplars and these issues. Thus, in addition to working off-campus (or at least out of these classrooms) and writing your hands off in writing practices, I want you to pay close attention to these assigned books. I highly recommend that you take constructive and creative notes on the books (and occasionally assigned web site materials), including a summary of the author's main ideas, questions you wish to raise in class discussion, and applications to your own personal interests and experience. The final exam will be drawn from the study questions that appear on each class's agenda. The exam will focus on your comprehension of the class materials and discussions as well as your ability to apply what you have learned to your life. 25% of the grade.

(4) Presence and Participation: You never know what you will hear or say in this class. It behooves us all to be present, open and engaged. So, each student starts with twenty points, and for each class a student misses, two points are taken off. Come to every class, and you keep all twenty points. Serious medical problems, with a doctor's note, death in the family, athletic events, and job interviews (with documentation) are considered excusable. Also, as part of this requirement, on the second day of class, please turn in student profile with photo (student ID, driver's license, or snapshot), so I can put face and name together as soon as possible and learn a little about you. 20% of grade.

Extra Credit: The instructor is open to student-initiated projects for extra credit.

Grade Scale: A = 93 & above; B = 86 and above; C = 78 & above; D = 70 & above; F = below 70.

Any student who feels that he/she may need academic accommodations in order to meet the requirements of this course—as outlined in the syllabus, due to presence of a disability, should contact the Office of Disabilities Services. Please telephone the office at 314-977-2930, or visit Room 131 in the Academic Resources Center, 3840 Lindell Blvd. Confidentiality will be observed in all inquiries.

A mid-term in which the student grades herself/himself will be given during mid-term week. This will allow the student to assess how she/he is progressing in the class.

N.B. Plagiarism, of course, results in automatic "F" for the course.

Class Process

On Being Pro-Active.

- Please let us know of videos, CD's, speakers, concerts, demonstrations, and events that seem relevant to what we are doing in class; I will try to be flexible with our schedule and incorporate or announce these as much as possible.

On Participating in Small-Group Discussions.

- All students are to abide by the this simple rule that no one speaks a second time until everyone who wants to has had a chance to speak. Keep in mind the following from theologian David Tracy: "Conversation is a game with hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary; to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it." (David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, p. 19).

On Participating in Large-Group Discussions.

- If, for whatever reason, a student does not wish to speak when called upon by the instructor, she or he may simply say, "Pass."

Required Books, available at campus bookstore.

1. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*
 2. Jim Forest, *Love is the Measure*
 3. Chân Không, *Learning True Love*
 4. Riane Eisler, *The Power of Partnership*
 5. bell hooks, *Feminism is For Everybody*
 6. Starhawk, *Webs of Power: Notes from The Global Uprising*
- Regular, pertinent handouts and web sites will be announced and/or distributed to supplement these assigned books. These, too, will appear on the final exam.

Approximate Course Sequence & Assigned Reading

Weeks #1-2: Orientation, Introductions, Writing Practice.

Reading: Goldberg, *Writing Down The Bones* (continues throughout the semester)

Week #2-4: A Social Justice Framework – Partnership or Domination

Reading: Eisler, *The Power of Partnership*

Weeks #5-7: Movement #1, The Catholic Worker

Reading: Forest, *Love is The Measure*

Weeks #8-10: Movement #2, Engaged Buddhism

Reading: Không, *Learning True Love*

Weeks #10-12: Movement #3, Feminism

Reading: hooks, *Feminism is For Everybody*

Weeks #13-15: Movement #4, Global Justice

Reading: Starhawk, *Webs of Power*

Brief Professor Profile

My name is Mark Chmiel [last name is pronounced “Schimmel”]. I have been teaching as an adjunct professor in Theology at Saint Louis University (1997-present) and in Religious Studies at Webster (1998-present).

I have lived in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood for the last eight years. Before that I lived in Berkeley and Oakland, California where I studied at the Graduate Theological Union for my PhD in Religion and Society. Originally from Louisville, Kentucky, I also received a Master’s degree in Justice and Peace Studies from the Maryknoll School of Theology in Ossining, New York. I’ve also been fortunate enough to travel to England, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, Israel, Palestine, and Italy.

My first book, *Elie Wiesel and the Politics of Moral Leadership*, was published in May 2001 by Temple University Press (Wiesel is perhaps the world’s most famous survivor of the Nazi Holocaust; many people have read his searing memoir *Night*). For my views on Wiesel’s position on the Middle East conflict, see my “Elie Wiesel and The Question of Palestine,” at <http://www.tikkun.org/magazine/index.cfm/action/tikkun/issue/tik0211/article/021124.html>

This spring I am publishing *The Book of Mev: A Young Wife Remembered*, a memoir about my late wife, photojournalist and SLU alum Mev Puleo. Her book of interviews with people in Brazil, *The Struggle is One: Voices and Visions of Liberation*, is an excellent introduction to Christian liberation theology.

Last fall I took a brief sabbatical from teaching and I worked with the International Solidarity Movement in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. My dispatches are available on-line at www.ctsastl.org/ism

My religious tradition is Catholicism, and I have had on-going interest in Judaism and Buddhism, and I am nurturing a new interest in Islam. For many years I have volunteered on Friday nights at Karen House, a Catholic Worker house of hospitality for homeless women and children. I am a member of the Center for Theology and Social Analysis. We offer religious reflections on current issues on the second Sunday each month in Forest Park Southeast at our center (1077 S. Newstead). We also have weekly meditation sessions at 5:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and at 7 a.m. on Fridays.

Over the years I’ve worked with the Sanctuary Movement (for Central American refugees), the Pledge of Resistance against U.S. Intervention, Witness for Peace in Nicaragua, Amnesty International, the Palestine Solidarity Committee, Pax Christi, and the East Timor Action Network.

What I like about teaching at SLU is that I meet so many committed and curious students who are willing to question and to act in the spirit of service, solidarity, and social justice. When I see them involved to close the School of Assassins at Fort Benning, vigiling on campus for the people of Iraq, gathering petitions to oppose Missouri’s use of the death penalty, speaking about their eye-and-heart-opening experiences in Nicaragua, or tutoring rambunctious children at Karen House, I am inspired and grateful.