

AN ATTITUDE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

My mom had a strong influence on my attitude of social justice. When I was two years old, my mom became a single parent with one teenager, one pre-teen and me, the baby until my little sister was born 7 years later. Three things from my childhood inform my attitude of social justice.

At two years old, my mom and dad got a divorce. I believe my mom was one of many women victimized by a male dominated judicial system. Prior to the divorce, she and my father were in the clothes cleaning business – at one point my father owned his own cleaners and was doing quite well. I guess you could say they were part of the up-and-coming black community living in the City of Berkeley. However, when they got a divorce, my mom's finances and social status plummeted. To add insult to injury she felt unfairly treated by the judicial system that only gave her minimal child support, no alimony support, and did not enforce child support payments when my father conveniently “forgot” to pay, which was often. My mother was a master seamstress, though terribly undervalued and between sewing jobs and when she could find part time, temporary work in the cleaning business, she managed to eek out a living and support her children and even help her oldest daughter go to college. Her pride would not allow her to accept welfare support as an income option.

However, I believe the divorce and her bitterness behind how she felt unfairly treated by the courts, her sudden change in social and economic status, and how she felt abandoned by her so-called friends once she “fell from (social) grace” sent her into a prolonged state of depression. I knew when she was having a particularly rough time of it all when I'd hear her soft laments and silent tears. I knew the source of these laments and tears for often she railed in bitter anger about her lawyer who acted more like he was my father's lawyer than my father's lawyer. As a child, all I could do was watch, listen and dream of saving my mom and all people imprisoned by anger, hurt, and the pain of injustice. Though I had no labels for her depression at the time, I dreamed of freeing her. My solution to feeling powerless to release her from her depression or to even voice my concern for her depression, was to escape into the world art.

But there was another side to my mom. Just as I would hear her soft laments and silent tears, and unrequited anger, I would also hear her adamant advocacy for social change. I remember my mom's support for President Eisenhower because he got Congress to enact the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction in 1957. Later, in the 60s, my mom became a great supporter of Malcolm X. When black people began to take pride in being black, she was among the first to wear her hair in a graying natural. It was also during this time that she went to Merritt Junior College and later transferred into the University of California at Berkeley where she graduated with a BA in History. She went on to work as a nutritionist and later work for BACS as a director of a Senior Center.

In our home, especially during the 60s, opinions were expressed freely and loudly about the politics of the times and the social conditions we lived in the context of history.

The issue of Justice, both personal and social was big in my mom's life and helped to shape my young life, so that by the time I was in my late teens and early 20s, I was ready to do whatever I could to affect positive change. When the Black Panther Party came along, they were right in my path. It just made sense to me to join them on the road to social change. And so I did.

Rev. M. Gayle Dickson