

Though social justice work often evokes strong feelings, Sydnee Viray and Robert J. Nash argue that advocates must move beyond anger in order to be effective. Here are some ideas how.

By Sydnee Viray and Robert J. Nash

Taming the Madvocate Within: Social Justice Meets Social Compassion

AS SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATORS and advocates, we strive to be result-oriented pragmatists and compassionate change agents. We employ social justice instruction and philosophy to promote unity on campus, as well as mitigate the boundaries as social justice relates to the general curriculum. Our diversity work with student affairs graduate students, faculty, and staff throughout the country is predicated on one major strategic question—how effective have we been in creating mutually supportive, compassionate social justice communities throughout the campus as well as off campus? The more we strive to help our students and colleagues to become effective and compassionate advocates, however, the more we find that it is impossible (indeed, naive) to separate how we advocate from what we claim to advocate. This is a salient learning task that students will face when they begin to employ authentically effective communication strategies.

We will use the terms *advocacy* and *activism* because the former connotes “calling compassionately to others in order to bring about change,” and the latter denotes

“taking vigorous, bold action in order to produce immediate outcomes.” “Compassion,” says the Dalai Lama, “is the radicalism of this age” (p. 256). We believe that it is social compassion that is the radical notion that has supported the greatest social changes in our time. Advocacy is a process; activism is a product. Advocacy calls for empathy, patience, determination, nonjudgmentalism, and humility. Activism calls for directness, righteous indignation, critique, and immediate, tangible results.

Listen to the words of James Baldwin (in a letter to his nephew), who was both an activist and an advocate, in the sense we are talking about:

You don't be afraid ... these [white] men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word “integration” means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it. Great men have done great things here and will again

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and we can make America what America must become. (p. 9-10)

Unfortunately, in our lengthy experience in the higher education field, we have witnessed what we believe is the single greatest roadblock to successful advocacy work of all kinds, whether one is an advocate or an activist. We call this roadblock *madvocacy*, a term Robert has coined in several publications. The madvocate is “someone who tries to change minds through anger, righteous indignation, guilting, gossiping, and moral outrage ... madvocacy often results in silencing those who think, feel, and act differently for whatever reasons ... madvocates too often run the risk of creating enemies, not allies, to the cause” (p. 24).

Notice that we are not equating social justice activism with social justice madvocacy. Madvocacy is very often a default position in social justice work. Some well-meaning activists grow increasingly angry when they see little or no change in oppressive social institutions and practices, especially in the American university. And so they go on the attack by allowing aggressive dogmatic ideologies of social justice to sabotage the discourse of equality, fairness, and tolerance. The discourse contains tones of competition with ruinous intention. Some well-intentioned madvocates get so caught up in the rhetoric of ideological extremism that it becomes almost like a religious movement wherein complete, unquestioned conversion to the cause is the preordained way to go. And some madvocates honestly believe deep down that comfortable, complacent whites, and other social justice transgressors, need to be shaken out of their middle-class lethargy. And so they carry out a frontal attack on white

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and social class privilege using “any means necessary,” to quote James Baldwin’s phrase.

It is important for all of us to remember that, no matter how dysfunctional they might get, madvocates very often express a justified anger that is necessary as an initial stage for bringing about social change. Anger motivates action in so many different arenas. In this way, social justice activists and social compassion advocates are able to work hand-in-hand. For example, the Civil Rights Movement needed the self-designated “Black Nationalist Freedom Fighter,” Malcolm X, and the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Martin Luther King Jr., to effect change. As Martin Luther King Jr. recognized, both he and Malcolm X, despite their different change strategies, were complementary allies.

Madvocacy is also widespread throughout the academy. We have found in our social justice work that it is the madvocates who are the most likely to resort to using a weapon like gossip in order to stigmatize and isolate the nonbelievers. It saddens us at how often students and professionals throughout our university, as well as in our national consultancies, have sought us out to help them deal with the demoralizing side effects of social justice madvocacy. This issue affects faculty, administrators, and students. Nobody is immune to madvocacy—including your authors Sydnee and Robert.

Tragically, we believe that madvocacy is even more widespread today than it has been at any time in the past, particularly among those student affairs graduate students and professionals who are justifiably angry about injustice. As one of our students said: “I’m an angry activist; take it or leave it. This is who I am, and I’m proud of it. How else are we going to change anything if we don’t get pissed off and do something?” To this, we say, along with Thich Nhat Hanh: “Compassion is an active verb!” (p. 251). How so? To feel the others’ suffering and then try hard to alleviate it is the most salient social justice action of all. Alleviation of suffering has nothing to do with sympathy, pity, or simply making someone feel better.

MADVOCACY IS THE OPPOSITE OF EFFECTIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

WE OFTEN DELIVER THIS MESSAGE to our higher education graduate students: “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can kill ...

forever.” For us, intentional words of malice (name-calling) always have the potential to “hurt,” in contrast to the message delivered in the old adage that they don’t. Gossip, rumors, half-truths, lies, slander, “dishing,” “throwing some shade,” and innuendo have the unmitigated power to divide, devastate, and destroy whole communities of student affairs professionals—both at the graduate level of training and among practitioners throughout the university. This attempt at “othering” those who are within our own circles has the negative result of stirring up intragroup conflict. This is confirmed by social dominance theorists such as Felicia Pratto, Jim Sidanius, and Shana Levin, wherein the dominants within the in-group encourage aggressive behaviors like force, intimidation, discrimination, and “legitimizing myths.”

“Legitimizing myths” are consensually held values, attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and cultural ideologies that validate in-group identity and affinity. Whenever people we think of as friends and/or allies stoop to spreading those dreaded, yet omnipresent, myths behind our backs, the injuries to self-esteem and communal trust are imprinted forever. For example, because Robert often coteaches with Asian women and Black women, some in-group “myth legitimizers” spread rumors that the reason he coteaches with these highly qualified people is that he is just another white man who “exoticizes” women of color. These myths, unfortunately, are beginning to take on a life of their own beyond the important phenomena they describe. All too often, nowadays, these myths become judgmental storylines targeting those who are considered to be enemies of the social justice mission, even though they may be among its strongest allies.

We have decided to write this article now because we have witnessed firsthand, over and over again, how madvocacy, along with the intent to hurt others, can be the most deadly and counterproductive of all the advocacy styles and can often become the archenemy of effective social justice advocacy. How can a madvocate be an authentic advocate or activist for social justice, fairness, and equal treatment and still engage in hypocritical, back-biting behavior? Paradoxically, we ask—where is the “justice” in becoming social injustice activists?

For example, where is the justice when activists openly deride white female students for not knowing that they have been objects of sexism? Where is the justice when activists belittle Asian/International students because they are “blind” to the racism that has been imposed on them by the so-called “privileged white class” who tend to “exoticize” them? Where is the justice in insulting a higher education faculty member behind her back because she is someone who is trying, awkwardly and unsuccessfully, to be a “savior” in order to atone for her past “oppressive sins”? Where is the justice in turning our friends/allies into enemies behind their backs—a phenomenon called “frenemies”—because they might have a different opinion about social justice? This happens because among so many social justice activists the race is always on to prove that they are better at liberating oppressed groups than even their “friends” might be. In comparison with activists, “friends” are always seen as deficient in some way in advancing the cause of social justice.

We wonder why almost no research or scholarship in the student affairs field appears on the disastrous effects of this maladaptive advocacy style in the academy, especially among self-appointed groups of social justice activists in higher education and student affairs programs. We have seen innumerable graduate student cohorts, and faculty departments, in higher education implode and explode because competing, true-believing factions of one kind or another develop within the in-group. In one sense, this is understandable because anger is sometimes a justified response to injustice, especially during the early stages of social justice training. In fact, social dominance theorists, along with critical and liberation theorists, teach that in-group anger is a defensible emotion to keep a group cohesive and committed to the values and ideologies of the social justice community. Identifying anger is an early, and necessary, stage of social justice training.

Just recently, for example, one of our graduate students, “Michele,” broke down into tears as she recounted a betrayal by one of her angry cohort madvocates. This classmate was spreading a rumor that because Michele was an International Asian student

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(and, therefore, perceived to be privileged and probably wealthy), she couldn't really understand the "marginalization and oppression" of American minorities. Michele had also overheard a group of students of color in her cohort refer to her as a "spoiled, rich, Asian bitch," who "just doesn't get the real meaning of oppression."

What these in-group madvocates never bothered to learn beyond their stereotyping was that this International Asian student came from a very working-class background, and her father had actually been unemployed for years after being laid off from his job. Michele's mother, a low-wage-earning schoolteacher in a private Christian school in China, was the only breadwinner in the family. Furthermore, the Asian student sent home to China 75 percent of her assistantship salary to support both her parents and her younger sister. In some ways, this Asian student was far more "marginalized" and "impoverished" than the gossipers who were lying about her. Unfortunately, Michele found herself irrevocably alienated from her cohort during the time she was in the graduate program. Even though the in-group madvocates might have been accurate in their assumption that Michele missed the activist message, we believe that they undermined the possibility that she might have become a strong advocate for their, and her, cause. To this day, she still feels unfairly "stereotyped" and "abused" by them.

Then, there was the white, gay male student in one of our classes who intellectually understood the complexities of social justice and his identity within the historical context of the United States and higher education. However, he was also a practicing, and proud, Christian who believed that, no matter what our differences might be, we all have a place in the kingdom of God. Because his religious beliefs and practices were out, others in his cohort felt the need to call him out on his "invisible gay identity." His graduate cohort downplayed his commitment to social justice philosophies because he dared to use the word of God to justify his beliefs rather than the words of the leading social justice scholars.

We also remember a black female student who wanted to join the exclusive affinity space of Asian students on our campus—just because she felt she needed to "learn" more about the community. But these Asian students rejected her from their affinity group, telling her that they didn't need "saviors" or outsiders who

felt "sorry" for them. As a result of having her feelings hurt, the black student started to target her Asian "friends" with pointed comments, both in the classroom and behind their backs. Unfortunately, all of this ended up confirming to her Asian "friends" that they had the right to protect, and defend, the need for their own, exclusive affinity space.

IDENTITY, GOSSIP, AND MADVOCACY

IT IS HELPFUL TO KNOW that the Latin root of the word *identity* (*idem*) means sameness. The word *identity* was first created to keep others out in order to protect the purity of an in-group. Gossip often becomes the primary weapon to maintain group purity and to enforce sameness. It is important to note that the word *identity* has become, by far, the most commonly used word in social justice vocabularies throughout the country. The narrative of identity, according to social dominance theorists, has a strategic function. It enhances greater individual stability and group cohesiveness; it establishes a moral hierarchy within the social in-group; and it creates an exclusive space for affinity members.

One of the unfortunate implications of this reliance on a narrative of identity, however, is that both the word and the cause eventually become stale. It is our conviction that social justice work requires new terms, new strategies, and new worldviews if it is to remain sustainable and fresh. We well remember one of our graduate students—a person of color—who remarked in class:

This oppression and privilege stuff is really getting old for me. I've been exposed to it since elementary school. What's actually gotten better after all this exposure? Frankly, I'm bored silly with the "same-old, same-old." Can't we come up with something new? Something that will result in actual behavior change? Am I destined to face two years of graduate study trying to act passionate and committed about a topic that I probably know more about than my instructors and classmates? I'm tired. All I want is action.

Moreover, too much of an obsession with trying to promote a rigid conception of identity theory in social justice work paves the way for gossip to occur

between and among specific members of in-groups who are seen as being less loyal to the cause of identity than they should be. Gossip is a way to keep identity transgressors in line. It is in the in-group where identity factions and subgroups form. Our memory is vivid of one higher education cohort that was hopelessly divided among its own members: white lesbians gossiped about black lesbians and vice versa; older members gossiped about younger members and vice versa; loners gossiped about cliques and vice versa; residential-life activists gossiped about those they considered to be student-activities “pacifists” and vice versa; the “downtown bar-hoppers and party-goers” gossiped about the “holier-than-thou church-goers” and vice versa; and so on. The temptation to spread malicious rumors behind people’s backs is greatest whenever individuals feel left out, threatened, jealous, angry, confused, disappointed, frustrated, hurt, or put down by certain others in the group.

We are writing this piece precisely to support students who are angry over social injustices. And so we say to all of these students: You do not have to gossip in order to realize your goals! You do not have to overemphasize the purity of identity as a social justice construct. Instead, you will have to exemplify what you stand for as a social justice advocate. You will need to become an exemplary “social compassion communicator” in all areas of your life, both inside and outside the sociocultural arena. As James Baldwin reminded his nephew, you will need to walk your talk. You will need to be a “lover” and not a “hater.” You will need to reach out explicitly to others by using compassionate discourse rather than punishing them with derisive insults behind their backs because they don’t fit your stereotype of what social justice activists should be.

THE BEST ANTIDOTE TO MADVOCACY: TEACH SOCIAL COMPASSION IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL JUSTICE

WE SUPPORT A COMMUNICATIVE discourse that takes the side of social compassion in order to get

to social justice. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this *deep looking*. In past writings, Robert has called this method of authentic communication *moral conversation*. This approach allows for a democratic conversation through a disciplined combination of forgiveness, generosity, attribution of the best motive, and strong, yet flexible, moral conviction. Moral conversation, or deep looking, evokes; it doesn’t provoke. It also challenges both the excesses and deficiencies of the social justice culture in higher education, but without moral self-righteousness or ideological superiority. It keeps the dialogue evolving without the need to hold on to the guilt, and indignation, that all too often results in an unhealthy cynicism, and anger, toward others. In the spirit of Hanh, it might even lead to love.

Compassion in its root meaning is “feeling with,” not just with the victims of social injustice but also with those who are our potential allies, coworkers, cohort mates, and classmates. “Feeling with” someone, or some group, is the most visible expression of genuine compassion toward others. It is an attempt to understand, and to identify with, the needs of others—no matter how far off the social justice course they might have drifted. Social compassion communication challenges the temptation for us to believe that there is one surefire approach to social justice, and this is to become a madvocate who might justifiably use any means possible in order to achieve worthy ends.

Sydnee once said the following to a class she was coteaching with Robert:

Compassion is simply synonymous with being human. It is not the outgrowth of some abstract cause; neither does it result in an ideological zeal that the world will be saved if only it accepts our precious political or religious message. No, the way to bring about change will require persistence and commitment to be sure; but there must first be the necessary precondition of love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit, and warm-heartedness. All of these qualities coalesce into acts of compassion toward others.

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We must remember in the pursuit of a compassionate justice that we are trying to support the lives of other human beings, even if they might appear to be “freaks.”

Sydnee did get uncharacteristically passionate about the importance—indeed, the necessity—of expressing compassion in every part of our lives. She was very firm in saying that we just cannot talk about a life well lived without first discussing our human duty to show compassion to all others. She asked the group this question: “To what extent is each and every one of us willing ‘to enter into and share others’ suffering?” Moreover, she added, “To what extent is our compassion ‘undifferentiated’? That is, does it get expressed in care and concern for each and every human being, no matter their various identities, age, politics, philosophies of life, religious and spiritual beliefs, or whatever else?”

THE MEANING AND APPLICATION OF SOCIAL COMPASSION EDUCATION

COMPASSION IS ALL ABOUT showing others that we understand, and feel, their suffering; that we will do everything we can to help alleviate it; and that we will respect these others every step of the way. Thich Nhat Hanh says that in order to work for peace and justice we must first “uproot war and injustice from ourselves” (p. 74). The Dalai Lama also says that compassion must first start with ourselves. In his words: “The first beneficiary of compassion is always oneself ... compassion reduces our fears and suspicions ... it focuses us away from our own narrow self-interest ... it opens us to others and brings us a sense of connection with them. ...” (p. 45). And Martin Luther King Jr. states that “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear” (p. 72).

In the spirit of these three great compassion agents, we often say to our students the following: when in doubt, check it out ... directly with the person, or group, whom you might be tempted to advocate against. We urge them to do what the Dalai Lama does every single day of his life: Absorb the blows, bring them to their heart, transform them, and send them back as love. Above all, let go of anger.

In contrast, in our coteaching, we offer our students and colleagues an alternative way to absorb the blows. We strive to become, instead, humanistic pragmatists and pluralists. Our basic conversational rule

in teaching and collaborating is this: Make the other person look good, and you will look good, even if you have to deliver “bad news” every now and then. Make the other person look bad, and you will look bad. While it is true that “sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can kill,” words can also soothe. Therefore, here is our humble advice to all our students and colleagues on the social justice journey: Strive to be soothers, not killers. We try to make the case that soothing, when done authentically, can confer at least as many survival benefits as killing. And soothing does not always have to be the easy way out. Its Old English root is “to bear witness to, to prove true.” Thus, to soothe is to remain “calm and composed” in pointing out the truth regarding the suffering of others. This is a difficult task for those social justice activists who are full of rage and recrimination against the “oppressor.”

HOW TO USE COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL JUSTICE

“FREAKS ARE CALLED FREAKS,” observed author James Baldwin, “and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires” (p. 689). We must remember in the pursuit of a compassionate justice that we are trying to support the lives of other human beings, even if they might appear to be “freaks.” What follows are some communication strategies we share with our students whenever they are tempted to turn a human being into something beastly by talking about them behind their backs.

We ask advocates to consider these questions regarding their communication strategies:

- Is it heartfelt as well as headfelt?
- Is it necessary to say in order to make your point?
- Is it the appropriate time?
- Can it be said in a kind, nonaggressive, non-self-righteous way?

- What is making us so angry that we lose sight of the ultimate social justice prize—creating a diverse community of allies and supporters?
- Can we go directly to outliers (and “heretical” inliers as well) with whom we disagree without going indirectly behind their backs?
- Are we actually projecting, or displacing, onto others something in ourselves that we find troublesome?
- What are the risks and benefits of advocating as a madvocate-activist for social change? Do they outweigh the risks and benefits of advocating as a social compassion change agent?

The truth is that every single madvocate we know has been, or will be, the victim of madvocacy self-righteousness sooner or later. This, for us, is the inevitable karmic law of social justice madvocacy. In a famous letter from Mecca, Malcolm X wrote that his experiences with white people during his pilgrimage convinced him to “rearrange” his thinking about race and “toss aside some of [his] previous conclusions.” In a conversation with Gordon Parks, two days before his assassination, Malcolm said:

[L]istening to leaders like Nasser, Ben Bella, and Nkrumah awakened me to the dangers of racism. I realized racism isn't just a black and white problem. It's brought bloodbaths to about every nation on earth at one time or another. I did many things as a [black] Muslim that I'm sorry for now. I was a zombie then—like all [black] Muslims—I was hypnotized, pointed in a certain direction and told to march. Well, I guess a man's entitled to make a fool of himself if he's ready to pay the cost. It cost me 12 years. That was a bad scene, brother. The sickness and madness of those days—I'm glad to be free of them.

In the end, rightly or wrongly, social justice madvocates stumble on their own regrets when their actions are not in alignment with their moral values.

Here are three essential steps that victims of madvocates can take in order to resolve the depreciating spiral that madvocacy attack creates:

1. Respond quickly to madvocacy charges when and if these get back to the victim. These “micro-aggressions” become more difficult to counter after repeated circulation and wider dissemination.

2. It is generally best to respond directly and substantively to madvocacy aggression rather than use a “no-comment” approach. “No comment” tends to increase uncertainty, and further fuels the negativity of holier-than-thou social justice madvocates.
3. Diminish uncertainty by using a clear, point-by-point refutation of the social injustice charges with solid evidence.

There are also three essential disengagement strategies that bystanders can try in order to bow out of a madvocacy circle, no matter how much subtle and/or explicit group pressure there is to be a part of it:

1. Stop verbally participating in the madvocacy syndrome by pretending to be an “innocent” bystander. Even if one isn't the queen bee, indirect or direct participation makes one an inextricable link in the madvocacy chain. Make a conscious effort to change the angry, self-righteous energy. Instead, get busy with the actual social justice issues, and stop standing around accusing others of being lazy, ignorant, or detached. Reach out, do the work, and always model compassion. Dive headfirst into the details of the social justice project.
2. Let the madvocates know unequivocally of any dissatisfaction. It is more than permissible to stand up to those who perpetuate self-defeating social justice behavior. Explain clearly, but thoughtfully, that a laser-like madvocacy is a serious roadblock to the social justice work that each person in the group is trying to carry out. On the matter of gossip, redirect the gossipers' attention by requesting that they go directly to the source of their dismay. This will show the gossipers that not everyone in the in-group is willing to be a party to behind-the-back putdowns, and it will demonstrate an advocate's genuine moral integrity. Talk openly and often about the disastrous side effects of madvocacy in social justice circles. Avoid blaming, but simply explain what in-group and out-group cannibalism entails and how it harms the ability to do effective social justice advocacy. It is always better to champion a zero-tolerance madvocacy policy by being direct, open, and authentic whenever the temptations arise to accuse others of some transgression.

3. When all else fails, however, the opponent of social justice advocacy may have to voluntarily withdraw from the dominance within the in-group, and go a different way. This should always be done non-self-righteously, and with a determination to be the most supportive person to all those who find themselves the unfortunate targets of dominant in-group gossip and out-group marginalization. Remember that sometimes these targets became “enemies” because they were courageous enough to be different and to strive for virtue and excellence in their own best ways. Many have made the bold decision to seek their own truths in the face of dominant group resistance. The lesson for all of us is to try to practice some of this courage on our own. It is not a coincidence that the root meaning of the word *courage* is to lead from the heart. This, in the end, is what social compassion is all about.

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