

Connected by Words, by Technology, by Our Humanness

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Watching the events of the last couple of weeks unfold, I've struggled to know what to say and how to articulate the way that I feel. I am forever a student of writing and of words. I am forever a student of American Indian studies and public policy and administration. I believe in others, their stories, their experiences and that in evaluating our history we might understand where we come from and therefore develop answers and solutions to where we need to go. We are experiencing what feels unprecedented with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is not. Perhaps how we are addressing it as a society is unprecedented, but the pandemic itself is not. We are searching for answers regarding the rage and violence associated with the protests, but we only need to look to our past to truly understand why people are feeling the rage and frustration they feel. And in the end, it is our words, written or spoken, our policies, and how we treat each other that makes us part of a global society.

In the past six months, I think we have all felt or commented on the unprecedented times in which we are living. We have faced rapid changes in how we can and are allowed to interact: social distancing – no groups larger than 10; use of zoom and other virtual platforms as our only way to visually see anyone other than family; increased technology for communication and interaction and less personal contact; closures of restaurants and shops and all things deemed *non-essential*; the mandated wearing of masks.

We have experienced pandemics before. The great influenza epidemic of 1918 took the life of my great grandmother and her newborn child, leaving my grandmother and her two siblings to be shipped off to live with other family members so their father could work the family farm. It was a pandemic like no other. It took the young and the healthy and it often took them violently and quickly. Recently, I've thought of John M. Barry's (2004) book, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* where he wrote of two parallel struggles.

As the virus moved, two parallel struggles emerged. One encompassed all of the nation. Within each city, within each factory, within each family, into each store, onto each farm, along the length of the track of railroads, along the rivers and roads, deep into the bowels of mines and high along the ridges of the mountains, the virus would find its way. In the next weeks, the virus would test society as a whole, and each element within it. Society would have to gather itself to meet this test, or collapse. (p. 193)

His writing of the 1918 epidemic is just as applicable today as it was then. It is certain that the current virus has tested us as individuals and as a society, and that we must gather together as a united community to meet the challenge. While we are connected by technology, we must remember the necessity for the human connection aspect of society. The compassion, the care, the concern for others – for those who are the most vulnerable among us. And while the first parallel struggle during that time rings true today, I think the second struggle we are facing is much different. The second struggle Barry writes about is related to scientists and their search to solve the mystery of what was happening. I believe the parallel struggle we face today is about equity and justice. Most recently the protests and riots in outrage over the death of George Floyd and other black Americans have highlighted that all is not well within our world. We have seen protests in every state in the United States, as well as many other countries as they gather

to share their outrage through protests. There has been much to reflect on and consider how we can be better as people in a world in which we are instantly connected and simultaneously united.

We are hungry for connection, for peace, for justice. As a student of writing and public policy, I have struggled to find words, words that are meaningful. And constantly I seek to find ways to address how the policies and politics we establish impact the underrepresented and underserved.

While social construction theory acknowledges the role values, perceptions of people, places, and objects play in how individuals view and understand the world, it also plays a role in determining how policy and politics are operationalized (Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon, 2007). A simplified description of this theory categorizes individuals or populations of people into those who are deemed deserving and those who are deemed undeserving of policy benefits (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schneider & Ingram, 1993 and 2005; Ingram et al., 2007). Social construction theory proposes that policy designs are primarily driven by those who fall within the category of the deserving target population, and cultural values and social judgments drive policy design rather than dispassionate objectivity. Therefore, those who fall within the undeserving target population are much more likely to necessarily be viewed in a negative social construct – thereby unavoidably resulting in unequal access to benefits within the very same policy design.

Public policy is the mechanism that allows the government to institutionalize and perpetuate social constructions, and unchecked and unchallenged, social constructions allows for the marginalization of groups of people who become disadvantaged (Schneider & Ingram, 2005). Social construction theory further proposes that policy designs and their operationalization, whether historical or contemporary, have long-term implications on target populations based on where they fall within the deserving and undeserving categories (Ingram, et al., 2007). It is the long-term impacts of our politics and policies that we fail to remember. We too often think that because they are in the past they are no more. And often, those (mis)perceptions are made by those making the policies – not those who are adversely impacted by the policies.

While I'm always seeking new knowledge and information, I often go back to writers and books I have read over the years to find meaning, and guidance, and inspiration. One of the writing workshops I took as an undergraduate student at the University of Idaho was from travel writer, Eddy L. Harris. He describes himself as tall and bald, but acknowledges that he must see himself in ways he hadn't considered because of other's perceptions of him simply because of his skin color. He challenged me to think deeply and personally about my writing, but more than that, he moved me with his own writing. Harris's (1993) memoir, *South of Haunted Dreams*, he writes about the history and associated emotions of the past. He reminds us that just because something happened in the past doesn't mean that the emotions and impact of those events remain in the past. They carry forward and continue on in generations forward. They continue on in future generations in both good and bad ways.

The things that have happened – the shadows cast, the footprints that are left in the dust – they alter the landscape of our experience not just for the moment but permanently. From the death camps to slavery to the simplest injustice, can you not see, then, how the world has been formed and how everything reminds us of what we were and what we are and what we will never be? One thing stems from another and leads to still another. All things come together in the moment we call now. And unless we can look beyond the here and now and see what effect our actions will have on the events that follow and on those who will come after us, we will selfishly and foolishly continue to leave chaos for others to decipher and unravel and endure. (p. 116)

Harris's words are powerful and relevant. They remind us that the past impacts the present. The past persists and lives on in the lives of those whose families experienced the atrocities of our government and leaders. The policies and decisions made in the past adversely affect those who did not have a voice or a position in the policies made. He calls upon us to stop. To think. To reflect. To understand that what we do today will have lasting impact – impact we can't even begin to understand. The sins of our past meet and remain with us in the present.

I write and share the writings and teachings of others so that we might stop and reflect. To remind us to take the time to listen and hear each other. To go beyond asking how someone is doing, but rather to listen to how they are. To hear their voice and their words. To hear them. One author who has inspired me more than others through his story, his writings, through his words is N. Scott Momaday. In Momaday's (1997) work, *The Man Made of Words*, I am reminded of the power of words, the power of story.

Because of language we are, among all the creatures in our world, the most dominant and the most isolated. Our dominance is supreme, and our isolation is profound. That equation is the very marrow of story. It is a story in itself. We have no being beyond our stories. Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words. Perhaps the greatest stories are those which disturb us, which shake us from our complacency, which threaten our well-being. It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant. (p. 169)

We must find ways to work together as citizens of communities, of states, of nations, and as part of our greater world citizenship. As humanity. We must take time to connect and care for each other, to understand, to listen, to give voices to those who don't have them. It is our responsibility to close equity gaps for the underserved, the underrepresented, and those who haven't had a voice in the policy decisions that directly impact them. We are part of a global community that is connected by words, by technology, and by our humanness.

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