



Reflections

Where is Katniss When You Really Need Her? Social Justice, Adult Education, and Trump's America

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I weathered the 2016 presidential campaign with a group of retired “women warriors” who have spent their collective lives battling for social justice in a variety of professional settings including social work and education. Over the months, I watched as their expressions mirrored amusement, then consternation followed by fear as the Trump juggernaut moved slowly but inexorably toward winning the presidential election. Finally, on election night, during a flurry of emails, texts, and phone calls our fears turned to despair.

For several weeks after that night we could hardly speak about our fears for our country, our friends, and yes, ourselves. Yet, we could not *not* talk about the many social disasters, which are surely coming for many Americans. Occasionally, a moment of anger erupted from one of us: “How in the world could they vote for such a person?” Or, “They won, but what did they win?” As women, we were perplexed by the decision to vote for policies that would surely negatively affect the voter or someone in his or her family and community.

As older women, our first concern must be health care for ourselves, our family and friends. Fearfully, we wondered what this would mean for us as we grow older and need more complicated healthcare. What about young women who are raising children alone and need affordable health care? What about people who do not make enough to afford any kind of health insurance? What is going to happen to all of us?

Donald Trump's campaign of hate, anger, mean-spiritedness, and violence has allowed him to successfully divide and conquer we, the American people. In his own version of the “Hunger Games” he has divided us into sectors based on race, religion, economic class, age, gender, sexual orientation and ethnic origins. Are we going to be forced to decide which loss is more important – my healthcare or your citizenship? My right to marry or your right to vote? Why do so many Americans feel such hatred for each other? This election has proven that divided, we fall. We need a heroine like *The Hunger Games*' Katniss Everdeen to bring all the sectors

together to save America. But since Katniss is just a fictional character, we will have to do it ourselves.

I grew up in the middle of what is now known as “the rust belt.” I have listened as displaced workers whose families enjoyed high paying jobs in the automobile industry for generations complained bitterly about the loss of their jobs. Many refuse to take a low paying job or go for training for the new more technical manufacturing jobs that are beginning to move into their cities and towns. I listened to similar bitter stories on the news from places like the coal mining towns in West Virginia as people expressed their fear and sense of helplessness as the mines and factories closed once and for all.

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These places of disappointment, despair, anger, and fear are exactly where adult educators are needed the most. Many displaced workers expressed the fear that they have been left behind and forgotten in this new age of technology. Those who turn to community colleges and trade schools in the hopes of acquiring the skills that will once again allow them to adequately support their families often drop out. Over and over again, I have heard “All I want is job training so I can make enough to feed my kids. I do not have time or money to take all these art and history classes. I need to get to work.” Meanwhile, these institutions are trying to push these students toward degrees and transferring to a four year college, turning deaf ears on the pleas of these adult students turned Trump voters.

If we learn nothing else from this heart breaking presidential election, it should be to return to our roots in adult education. We must find ways to meet these adult learners where they are, not where we or our institutions are. Only by asking them what they need, will we be able to serve them in a meaningful way. It is imperative that we follow our forefathers and foremothers in adult education out into the rural communities, intercity neighborhoods, rust belt cities, and simply ask what is needed. I think it will become obvious that one curriculum does not fit all in a myriad of ways. Therefore, it is imperative that adult educators listen when our various populations speak. That must be the first step in developing effective adult education for all sectors of America.

The second step is to find the intersections of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age and so on, which are affected by the policies of our newly elected president and Congress. These intersections are the places that the various groups can find common ground and from that, develop a social agenda for activism. For instance, the destruction of The Affordable Health Care Act will devastate many families across all sectors of the population. The elderly are in grave danger without healthcare support as are families with children or families who work and live below the poverty line. In fact, many of the members of all of these groups live below the poverty line. It is in these intersections that a dialogue can be facilitated, leading to the recognition of common ground. It is here that adult educators must further empower their students by giving them the *practical* tools for developing activism using “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1989). Only by recognizing our common ground will Americans break down these artificial walls Trump uses against all of us.

During this presidential campaign it has become more than clear that adult educators must include social media in the curricula of critical consciousness. We must go beyond simply using social media as a teaching tool to teaching our students how to recognize when it is manipulated and misused. We must teach how to decide what is “fake news” and what constitutes legitimate news. It is mind boggling to realize that to this day many people believe that President Barack Obama is not an American citizen or that Hillary Clinton is involved in a child sex slave ring.

Used appropriately, social media can be a wonderfully efficient tool in organizing social activism. The Women’s March on Washington held the day following the inauguration of our 45th president began with a Facebook post and quickly circulated throughout social media, allowing an idea for a protest event to quickly become a reality. Adult educators have a role in developing pedagogy for understanding and implementing social media. I wonder how this election would have turned out if we were all more educated in the power for both good and evil of social media.

My women warrior friends are in the process of shaking off the despair and finding ways to move forward with their lifelong fight for fairness and equality for all Americans. Several women I have talked with have decided to create a “circle of light” in their lives, monitoring their own language and actions and striving for kindness and understanding. One woman vowed that when she finds herself criticizing others she will replace the word “wrong” with “different.” As they have all their lives, they have wiped away the tears of sadness and begun looking for ways to fight the Trump agenda of divisiveness, hate and violence. In fact, they organized a local “March for Humans” held on January 21st in sistership with the march on Washington. Watch out, Trump. Once these warriors get moving, they won’t stop and they are moving toward a reunification of America. They could use some adult educators to help end the Trump Hunger Games and tear down the walls he so cleverly constructed to further the gap between all of us.

References

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Dr. Alberta J. Morgan is recently retired after working and studying at Ball State University. She currently focuses her writing on the intersections of class, race, sexual orientation, and other marginalized sections of the American population.