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RS-1827
December 1, 2019

Social Location Project

I asked Mollie if she wanted to help me with some homework. Mollie is ten and has a voracious appetite for new vocabulary and language to apply toward her budding sense of social justice, so I knew that my social location project should include her somehow. It felt appropriate, because being a mom works its way into the way I experience the world, and looking at how things can be understood by children is something that often happens as a result of that piece of my identity. To begin, we had a discussion about what she thought social location might mean. She suggested it might be whether one is popular, or what neighborhood one lives in. I asked how those things could be interrelated, and bingo!, she got it. We talk often about concepts like white privilege and gender equality, so she already had a primer in understanding how her whiteness intersects with her being a girl. She caught on quickly that there are things in her social location that give her a boost just by being part of her, and which ones mean she might have to work harder to get the same results as someone else. We sat in the backyard of our Hanford, CA home, which is North of Grangeville—the side of town we were told by the (also white) realtor to stick to—and started to make lists of our identities.

I asked her how she thought this might be helpful for her to understand when she meets someone new or witnesses an injustice happening. I wish I had referred back to the Laurel C. Schneider essay *What Race is Your Sex?* before this conversation, because I think there is one line in there that explains why an examination of one's own place is necessary to justice work, "It is difficult to think around the corners of the world one inhabits, or to glimpse the limits and

gaps in one's on inherited view."¹ Even without sharing these exact words, Mollie and I were able to come to a similar conclusion: we have to know where we can hurt and where we can help, and we won't know that until we've looked at where we are. The different places where our identity cross and weave together are steeped in a history of colonialism to keep some perpetually subjugated. John A. Powell also has compelling insight as to why care should be taken to examine these cycles of oppression, "The greater our sense of interconnectedness, the greater the scope of our empathy and compassion for those who are suffering."² Mollie and I both feel strongly that working toward a place where we can have compassion for any situation or person would be a great place to be, and knowing our own context and its privileges and limits is a start.

Our lists were similar in many places, as one would expect. White. Assigned female at birth who identify as women—which was another important moment of our conversation. I learned that Mollie, while not having the word "cis" in her vocabulary yet, fully understood what it mean, and why that designation belongs in her social location. They diverged in other places. She noted the difference in power and voice between being a kid and an adult. Her words, "As a kid, I can't vote but I have to accept the decisions of the adults."

Taking the time to work with Mollie on this project helped me to shape how I could talk with young people in the future about social location and the intersections of identity. While

¹ Laurel C. Schneider, "What Race Is Your Sex?," in *Disrupting White Supremacy From Within* (The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 143.

² John A. Powell, "Lessons from Suffering," in *Racing to Justice* (Indiana University Press, 2015), 221.

youth work is not where I spend most of my time, nor is it the direction I plan on going in ministry, (I say “I plan” like God isn’t going to change plans on me 800 times) I do end up in the role as youth leader, camp director, or in charge of youth programs more often than I know what to do with. In these settings—especially in the case of weekend-long youth programs—the kids don’t all come from the same backgrounds, churches, or cities, and often many of them have never met anyone else in the group. I found myself thinking about a youth retreat type situation as I read Lee Anne Bell’s chapter during week seven. In it, she says, “Oppression cannot be understood in individual terms alone, for people are privileged or oppressed on the basis of social group status.”³ She goes on to talk about the dominant group privilege of individualism—which then skews the person’s view of how they perceive other people’s success or failures. In youth settings, it’s a mix between those who are already familiar with the dynamics of oppression and those who are not, and in the United Church of Christ, our youth (much like our adults) are predominantly white, racial invisibility due to being in the dominant group is something that should be considered. Weaving in social justice education and opening up space for the entire group to explore the complex matrix of the different “isms” would be a helpful way to bring them all up to speed, and hopefully without making the non-white youth feel singled out. I’m glad Mollie was my test run for seeing how familiar or easy-to-grasp the ideas are.

I think these conversations will become increasingly important in UCC settings, we will have to address the colonial roots of our own religious heritage and work through what that means to us and how we can best move forward in our justice work, acknowledging that our

³ Lee Anne Bell, “Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education,” in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 9.

ancestors had a hand in creating the systemic problems we are now working to dismantle. Kwok Pui-Lan outlines the problematic Christian tendency to hold every other religion up against a Christian yardstick for measurement—a method which tends to deem other religions, especially indigenous traditions, as inferior. In looking at the stained-glass windows in my home church featuring the Mayflower and pilgrims, I know that we are not exempt from this. Worse, we resemble too often Pui-lan’s description of the failings of liberal Christian theology, “Given that religious traditions exist in such diverse forms, his [John Hick’s] glossing over the differences that distinguish one religion from another smacks of the patronizing tendency of white liberals.”⁴ In my own social location, I can list “White” and “Liberal” as parts of my matrix. (Though I prefer progressive, even though that’s getting harder to say without an eyeroll these days). Knowing this is where I come from, I can try to dodge similar pitfalls of nauseating liberal Christian antics, while working to engage those in my congregational setting in deeper conversation about working through our colonial baggage in constructive and less patronizing ways. I like to imagine how much more authentic our community will be when we’ve addressed and have come up with a plan to continue addressing the swept-under-the-rug, hard topic of complicity in systemic oppression.

This was also addressed by Cimperman, offering a deeply-probing, multi-step and many-layered approach to not letting our own biases get in the way of the work—instead her approach is designed to open up to the interconnectedness between our realities. Social analysis takes the time to unveil all of the factors that come in to play when addressing an issue. It is a process that

⁴ Kwok Pui-Lan, “Beyond Pluralism,” in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 199.

addresses every factor that can be revealed through research, that ultimately provides a place to respond from. It's almost like taking the social location of a set of circumstances, but with community involvement. Cimperman quotes Thomas Clarke, saying, "Social analysis is not the prerogative of an elite. If a participatory, democratic way of life is to be a possibility, it requires basic confidants and skill on the part of ordinary people in making critical and informed judgments regarding the social contexts of their lives."⁵ In my own social location as a white middle-class woman, I get a sense that it will be best if I listen more than I talk, and support more than I take charge unless it is specifically asked of me. I can make spaces safer for other people to be heard, but my own voice is not always going to be the most necessary one in the room, especially when discussing the things the church has imposed on non-dominant groups over time.

In working on my social location project with Mollie, I was able to uncover a few things I had never really spent much time thinking about, but when laid out on paper, I was able to see where certain intersections within myself had occurred, and how they have maybe even stunted my own growth toward being the person God created me to be. As I was making the spiral that represents my social location, I started with the dark blue, purple and pink of the bisexual flag, but switched to green, which is a camouflage color, to show my marriage to my husband, which cut the pink blue and purple off after just part of a turn around the spiral. It wasn't until I did this that I recognized that in my "Not out, but not *not* out" expression of my bisexuality, I pass as straight and avoid awkward conversations about it not really mattering anyway because I married

⁵ Maria Cimperman, "Chapter 4: Social Analysis," in *Social Analysis for the 21st Century: How Faith Becomes Action* (Orbis Books, 2015), 84.

a man, but I also am not fully expressing who I am. In this act, I'm also not chipping away at the stigma that is associated with being bisexual—and I recognized that the ability to camouflage is a privilege that is afforded in the situation of being in a marriage to a man, but it doesn't change the fact that I am and have always been bisexual. I benefit from not appearing queer professionally and socially, and there's a disconnect that came out in this project—one I've probably been trying to compartmentalize and ignore so I won't have to deal with it. I'm curious about where that might lead me. As for the conversation with Mollie about it, she shrugged her shoulders, and said "I don't know who I like yet, but I'll figure it out some day." and I felt like being willing to be open about the un-talked about side of my identity with her opened it up for an honest, no-pressure conversation to happen while we talked now, and hopefully will remain open and no-pressure for future conversations.

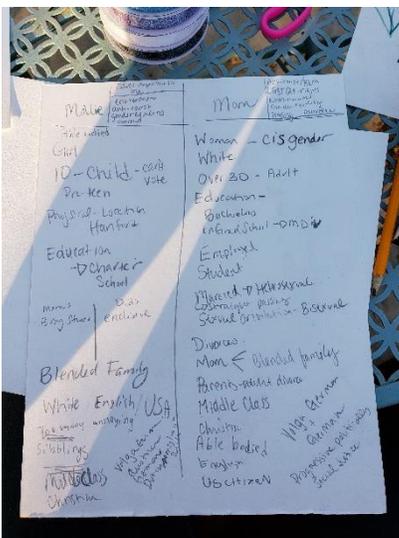
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Appendix: Photos and Video From our Project

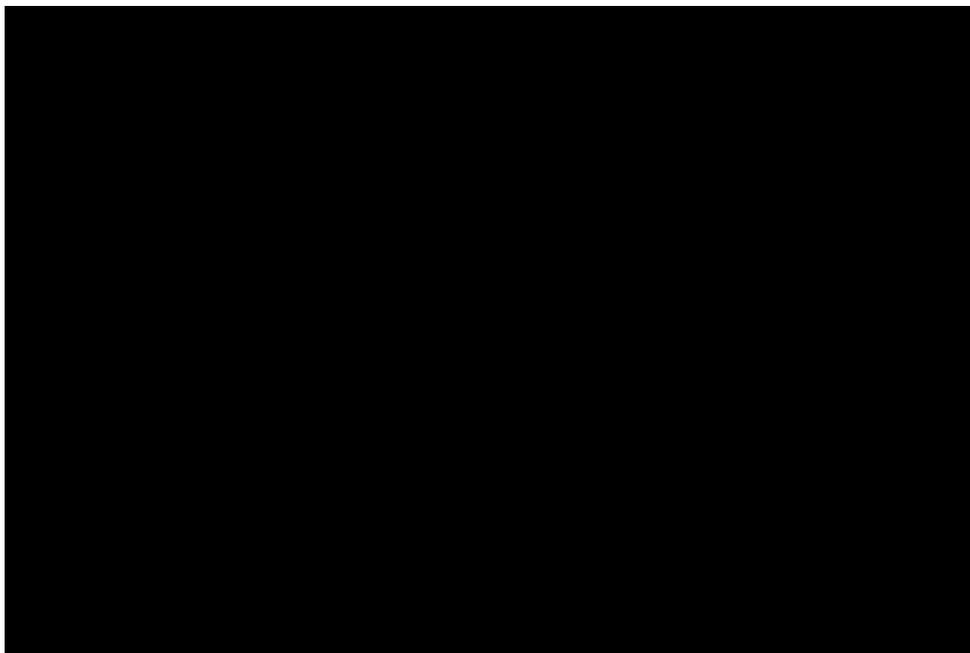


Above: Discussing class, and talking about the middle class.
Right: Mollie at work on her project.



Left: Our lists
Above: Mollie's Social Location Project
Right: My Social Location Project.





Please view this video of us as we talk about our social locations.