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**WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE
FOR ALL**
AN ESSAY

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For most high school students, choosing a college major is a difficult choice that requires a large amount of thinking and personal discovery. As my college acceptance letters started to arrive, I felt proud because I knew that I had done it, I would be the first in my family to go to college and eventually get a degree. After the initial excitement of getting accepted wore down, I realized that I didn't have a major or an idea as to what I wanted to do after my undergraduate career. I thought hard about what and who I wanted to be. I arrived to the conclusion that I wanted to become a civil rights attorney. My decision to study law was influenced by me having worked in a law firm throughout high school as my after school job, where I found passion in the pursuit of justice. Eager to start the path to become a civil rights attorney, I decided to seek a degree in Criminal Justice, Behavior and Law. I wanted to reach a larger number of Americans, so I took the challenge and doubled majored in Spanish. My decision to major in Spanish was also based in my search for justice in the United States. Recent figures of the Hispanic adult population show that 40 percent of adults are "largely Spanish speakers" (Pew Research, 2004). I wanted to protect the civil rights of as many people as I could, regardless of language.

As I dove further into the academic study of criminal justice, I realized that there seemed to be a theme of inequality. I was astonished to learn that men of color are grossly overrepresented in the prison population and are more likely to be arrested for the same crime than whites. The Bureau of Justice statistics found that African-American men have a 1 in 4 chance of going to prison compared to a 1 in 23 for white men (Prison Activist Resource Center, 1999). It is a fact that the criminal justice system isn't just. Currently, 56 percent of Americans disagree that minorities receive equal treatment as whites in the criminal justice system (Economic Insecurities, Rising Inequality, and Doubts about the Future: Findings from the 2014 American

Values Survey , 14). Why aren't the wealthy getting the same punishments as the poor? How could an institution set on delivering justice be so unjust? To say that I was bothered would be an understatement. I knew that if I ever wanted to see justice, it needed to start with me. More importantly, I needed to figure out why my search for justice was so important. A full understanding of my roll in honoring the virtue of justice requires me to explore my own experiences with the virtue.

I grew up on the Lower East Side of New York City to a single mother. As a young African-American male it would be dishonest to claim that I have never experienced unjust behavior. I was told by my family at a young age that because of my skin color the world isn't always going to be fair to me. I was told that even if my skin weren't brown the world still wouldn't be fair. Instilled in me was the belief that I should never behave in a manner that isn't just and that I should value people, no matter their color or situation as a fellow human

As an adolescent I was taught that America was built under the idea of liberty and justice for all and that all men were created equal. Understandably, American history class confused me because I couldn't understand the rationalization for such horrors such as slavery after being taught that all men were created equal. I was uncomfortable with what I was learning. Too young to realize it then, my emotional discomfort was a result of being hurt. I was hurt for my ancestors and the injustices that they endured for centuries, and I was hurt because at one point in time people thought my skin color made me less of a person. As my American history classes progressed, I read of the unjust treatment of other groups such as Native Americans, Asians, and women. I was angry at my country. I promised myself that I would never let anything like that happen again and if it did, I would never be a part of it. I vowed to always be just and to treat

people solely based on their character and their actions. I would never let my opinions of anyone be based on something other than who they are as a human being.

Justice is the most important virtue to me because of what I believe it to mean. My understanding of justice as a virtue is the commitment to fair, equal, and impartial treatment of a human being regardless of mitigating factors such as class, race, gender, beliefs, or age. Justice is the action of overcoming ones personal biases and treating all humans as equals and worthy of having their civil liberties upheld. In my world, justice is equal pay for equal work. Justice is being judged as an individual and not by the group to which a person belongs. Justice is when two children regardless of their parent's income can receive the same quality education. Justice is when the day a baby is born s/he will be afforded the same opportunities to prosper and thrive as everyone else. I look forward to the day when I can say that I have done everything possible to be just in my actions and in my thoughts.

Influencing everyone to actively seek out justice in the way that I do is an obstacle that I can't overcome alone. Most people would agree that racism, classism, and sexism is wrong but aren't actively trying to stop it. It is difficult to find people who are as dedicated to the pursuit of justice as I am. For example, the fact that women on average earn about 77 cent to every dollar a male earn even when they have the same occupation and experience as their male counterparts (Bassett, 2013) is something that we have known for years. Also known is that those disparities grow larger when taking into account the race of the female. Latinas earn 58 cents to the dollar a Latino male make (Bassett, 2013). We know that this practice is unjust and we have legislation to prevent it, but why haven't these practices been stopped? As a person who believes in the virtue of justice, I feel it is my duty to also educate others on why we need it.

When I went off to college, I would often find myself to be the only person of color and from a major city in the room. The majority of my classmates came from middle-class suburban and rural communities in upstate New York. A lot of them had never experienced social phenomenon such as racism, poverty, and crime. The injustices that I had seen and experienced such as the difficulty of hailing a taxi because of your race and perceived social class were unknown to them. Some of my classmates had no idea that depending on your name and race, it might be easier or more difficult to obtain a job. A study found that African-Americans are almost twice as likely as whites to be unemployed and when they are employed they earn about 25 percent less (Francis, n.d.). The study further found that perceived white names such as Emily and Greg were more employable than perceived African American names such as Lakisha and Jamal (Francis, n.d.). People with perceived white names have to send in about 10 resumes to get a call back compared to the 15 resumes people with perceived African American names have to send in to receive call back, even with their resumes are equal in qualification (Francis, n.d.). Injustices such as the previous examples were apparent to me but not as apparent to my classmates which frustrated me. I failed to realize that their view of the world was shaped in the same manner in which mine has been; by their communities.

What excites me about the virtue of justice is that the more I practice it I see more social progression. I realized that although horrible injustices have been, and are still being done, as a country we have never stopped moving towards a more just society. We are still working towards liberty and justice for all under the belief that all men are created equal. The progression towards justice for all is something that I have always wanted to be a part of and I am taking the steps though education to do so. For there to truly be justice it needs to be birthed on a micro-individual level which will later spread to our institutions. I'm fully committed to practice and

honor the virtue of justice throughout my lifetime. I am as committed as our founding fathers were to the promise of one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

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