

MAESTR@S' Questions for Living Racial Justice

MAESTR@S' work involves a process that we each must go through as individuals and as a group. There are different steps in this process, but they are all connected and continual. We are practicing social justice in a daily way through this process. A critical step is asking ourselves the most important questions and pushing ourselves and each other to answer them and to confront the challenges we face in doing this kind of work. This is a holistic process that helps us connect our minds, emotions, bodies, and spirits. As we "re-member" ourselves, we can pursue social justice completely. These are some of the questions we are asking, and many are explored through specific exercises that we do individually and together... For more information, please contact Marcos Pizarro, marcos.pizarro@sjsu.edu

Knowing and Owning Our Lives and Identities [who we really are]

Am I truly *seeing & feeling* the world that I live in? Do I understand the role of the forces that shape my life, such as:

Power, Ideology, and Hegemony (racism/white supremacy, sexism/patriarchy, homophobia/heterosexism, capitalism/"globalized" exploitation)

History (that shapes us and that we carry with us & live now):

Indigena Knowledge Systems & LifeWays

Conquest, Colonization, Resistance, Resurgence

Institutions: Schooling, Criminal Justice, Health, Immigration, Military...

Media, Corporations & Capitalist Seduction, Distraction, and Obfuscation

Inequality & Injustice

Identity-> the soul wound & self-hate we are taught

The power and possibility of our people and history and now

How can I continue to recognize and confront the shifting role of these forces in my life and in the lives of raza and my community?

How am I responding to this world—mentally, emotionally, physically, socially, culturally, spiritually—as an individual, family member, community member, "citizen"?

When and why am I numb, reactionary, angry, or creating?

What are my fears (the deepest ones, the ones I hold down inside)? How did I learn them?

How can I confront them?

Am I listening? How do I remind myself to continue to listen intently and to find new ways to listen? [answers are born within us, **and**, can come to us from the most 'unlikely' places]

Am I present, here and now, in this moment? [Am I able to turn off the media noise & the capitalist rat-race, to think, to feel, to not dwell on the past or the future?]

How do I Live, Breathe, Love, Fight, now, in this moment?

Do I see/feel/listen/connect to the people around me?

Am I honoring others every day (ancestors, family, loved ones) & all their wisdom and power and beauty and determination?

Overall, am I working to be a good person / **buena gente** in every act, step, and breath?

Living One Life Living with Integrity Teaching by Doing/Being

Joy Harjo: 'all acts of kindness are lights in the war for justice...'

Developing Voice and a “Language” of Transformation

Am I taking care of myself? What do I need?

Am I connected? to a place/land, to a people, to a community, to my own history, to my spirit, to my whole self

Am I remembering?

Am I learning? Sharing? Teaching?

Am I healing, and mourning in healing ways (acknowledging my pain and our collective and historical traumas, how they are manifested in my life, and finding ways of living with that)? Do I understand my emotions, their historical roots, and their impact on my life now [including fear and anger]?

Am I able to forgive myself for my shortcomings, for when I fall short?

Am I laughing?

Am I eating well [our foods]? Breathing? Sleeping? Caring for my body?

Am I in balance?

Am I caring for my spirit? How am I feeding it?

Am I taking care of others? [and letting them take care of me?] Am I building familia/community?

Am I thoughtful and careful with my words?

Words are sacred and to be cherished and honored -> our voice is the manifestation of our life force and so we have to honor that when we speak. This is also linked to the power of our **stories** and wisdom and honoring/taking care of them (autobiography), showing us the necessity of connecting our words to something bigger than ourselves (our families and our histories). We need to use/create language that mirrors our dreams, prayers, visions and histories, and recognize that our expression is the lens through which we perceive... Simon Ortiz tells us that: *We are Stories!* [When we are thoughtful, our words are action themselves, as they carry energy, a spiritual force that is not simply under our control, but something that carries us with it.]

Am I developing & nurturing my voice? Am I making time to nurture and express my creativity?

Living Social Justice

What is it I really want from/with/in my life & our lives? What do I pray for? Who do I want to be? *How do I live in my Place of Power?*

Sovereignty & Reclaiming our Desires

How am I moving toward that? What is my process [daily and over time]? Who is with me on that path and how do we do this together?

Daily Action & Patience Together

Am I Creating? [art & imagination & dreaming]

Prayer Love Ceremony – *This is sacred work!*

This work is all brought together into the LifeMap which is a visual/physical representation of our histories, present, and future. In doing the LifeMap, we ask:

What is my life goal?

What has been the biggest challenge I have faced to constructing the identity I want to have for myself as I pursue that goal?

What do I need from others in my life to support me in this work? How can I get this support?

Some background from Marcos on these questions:

Just as we began doing this phase of our work, I was asked to do a talk for college students and decided to focus on what I wished someone had told me at their age. I started writing the questions I should have been asking myself over the years. As I started working on the questions, I saw how it made sense. I saw that we could use these questions to work with others and develop processes for engaging in social justice work. They are written as questions we ask ourselves, but they are most powerful when framed as questions for a collective to answer.

We struggled getting to this work because we didn't have a model for doing it. The work really has to be indigena-based. What I mean is that our old ways did not put our work into separate boxes -> education, spirituality, action. It was simply Ways of Living. Our work now is about giving us the questions to help us develop models for daily action that lead toward social justice.

Some history on how we arrived at these questions:

Our work on this path, began when we questioned our own effectiveness in addressing the needs we and our communities have. We asked ourselves the following questions:

-How do we pursue social justice in working with youth when the media, schools, the justice system, our economic system, and virtually every other major force in US society works against that goal?

-How do we maintain this struggle over time and keep our sanity? How do we make the work sustainable?

-How can we actually collaborate with others in ways that affirm our goals and regenerate our spirits?

-How do we create methods, spaces, etc. that preserve and generate interest in challenging the mainstream understanding that our people have of themselves, of knowledge, of education, and of the world?

In asking these questions we came to some fundamental agreements in our work. Those include that: We now want to create a collective that will seek answers to these and other pressing questions. We want to establish a space that supports the pursuit of fundamental social justice and then develops ways of effectively spreading our work. We want to nurture radical gente, provide them a source of rejuvenation and affirmation, and work towards social justice in the most complete and powerful way possible. We want to bring together raza who:

***Believe in pursuing fundamental social justice and who are looking for support in this work,**

***Understand that we need to have a space to address all of our contradictions and conflicts in pursuing these goals,**

***Know that this is a process and requires a long-term commitment that they are willing to make.**

We hope that this will be multi-generational work, involving youth, elders, and everyone in between. *This is a chance to create something that will bring us all closer to our destiny!!!*

As we took on this new direction in our work, we also kept in mind some critical issues raised by Linda Tuhiwai Smith:

***We have to be clear about our intentions and self-critical about our own process.**

We need to think about the conditions of our own hearts and spirits, as well as about our own baggage and how each of these affects our work together.

***Who owns this work? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? To whom are we accountable?**

A critical insight into how to focus our work came when we began reading the work of indigenous scholars like Patrisia Gonzales, who shows us the need for healing work. In her 2005 article, *Diagnosing Internalized Oppression*, Gonzales explains:

For more than five hundred years, indigenous peoples have survived various oppressions: land theft, genocide, rape, the killing of our ancestors, forced religious conversion, boarding schools, the demise of many of our traditional ways of governance, languages, and cultural and spiritual teachings. This legacy is called "historical trauma" or intergenerational trauma. History has left many of us wounded and it has been passed from generation to generation. One need only look at the impact of alcoholism on families, the disproportionate rate of alcohol-related problems on future generations and codependent behavior among some loved ones who are related to alcoholics. The disproportionate rates of suicide on the reservations, diabetes, and men of color in prison are not solely because of poverty and racism.

Many indigenous psychiatrists and community healers agree that "internalized oppression" is a result of historical trauma passed across generations that continues to actively wound people.

"Those disproportionate rates point to internalized oppression as part of the cause," says mediator and peacemaker Roberto Chene. "It's a form of internalized oppression to see so many of your own hurting. It hurts you. The daily expression (of injustice) forces you to shut down and numb yourself. If not, the daily anger would eat you up."

...One important step in healing internalized oppression is understanding how social structures contributed to, or created, the oppressions. Self knowledge and self understanding is also crucial. Understanding or recognizing what has hurt us is the first step towards changing our behavior and perception of problems.

According to Chene: "A common form of internalized oppression is that when we become aware of our dysfunction of the particular group, we blame ourselves. We ask the question, what's wrong with me rather than what's wrong with us that we're like this. We're in relationship with society. The emphasis on the individual assumes that the dysfunction arises from within ourselves. It's an internalized oppression between human beings and structured society."

In communal cultures, rectifying internalized oppression must be addressed not only at a personal level, but with family members and within communities because the oppression is like a germ that infects collectively...