



Conversation With Gary Bailey On Social Workers' Commitment to Social Justice

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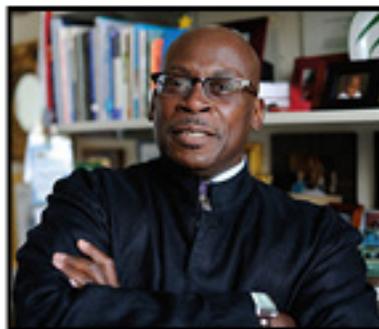
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[Editor's Note: In our Spring 2015 Issue, the Conversation featured an interview between Gary Bailey, Professor of Practice at the Simmons School of Social Work, and Cynthia Williams, Assistant Dean for Field Education and Community Partnerships at Washington University's Brown School, about the events in Ferguson, MO in the Summer of 2014. More than a year has passed since Ferguson, and the issues of police brutality and the killing of unarmed people of color remain ever present. We've asked Gary Bailey back, to be interviewed by Field Educator Editor Kim Harriman. Kim is also the Field Director at the Simmons School of Social Work. In this interview, Gary looks back over a tumultuous year and also discusses his ideas about how field educators can leverage their unique perspectives to help their schools be more responsive to the community.]

Kim Harriman: Gary, several months ago I came to you while preparing to write the Editorial for the *Field Educator*. I was feeling compelled to address our response, as social work educators, to police brutality and misconduct in dealing with people of color, particularly African Americans.

As a white woman, I felt inadequate in doing so, and you said to me, "If not you, then who?" Here I am, months later, with this still on my mind, and I'm wondering if you could just help me dig in a bit?



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Professor of Practice
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Kim Kelly Harriman, MSW
Associate Professor of Practice
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Gary Bailey: Of course. Glad to.

KH: It's been over a year now from the events in Ferguson, and tragically, incidences of police killings and unwarranted brutality of unarmed people of color continue to be a regular occurrence. And, of course, what we hear in the media we know is only the tip of the iceberg. As a social worker, and a social work educator, what are your thoughts looking back over the year?

GB: It has provided a laboratory of opportunities to have very difficult and challenging discussions about things that, for generations, have not worked well in this country.

It's been like the removal of a scab over a wound that has not ever healed, a wound that has to do with race in this country. It's been very challenging, it's been very difficult, exhausting, and it's been frightening for many.

But I also see an enormous opportunity for how we train and educate our students. In many ways it's a natural laboratory to examine what's going on in the external world.

KH: This is what I keep coming back to. Where to go with all of this? It's the responsibility of those of us who work in field education to connect and straddle the academy and the community.

We facilitate communication and exchange of ideas through our frequent contact with community based social workers. Do you have any thoughts on how field educators can leverage their unique perspectives to help the school be more responsive to the communities?

GB: Field educators are not operating in a vacuum. They are operating in communities that are being confronted with these issues on a daily basis, in clinical sessions, in their organizations, in responding to the concerns, worries and apprehensions staff bring to work each day.

As social work educators, we can begin to model ways in which we can have more effective dialogue and uncomfortable conversations with each other. What we're dealing with makes people uncomfortable on all sides, including folks who are in the majority, because what they have been seeing is something that is now undeniable. They're watching things happen in front of their eyes where they can't pretend that what they're seeing they're not seeing.

And then I think, for practitioners of color and other allies, it's a validation of things that people have known, in terms of their lived experience. And it's, "How do we begin to bridge that gap?"

KH: Right.

GB: I say to my students, "You're in a clinical program, but the clinical perspective exists in a macro context. Forces in the world in which we live continuously bombard us and we have to really take

that into account.”

KH: As a faculty at Simmons, we're striving to open up our conversations in matters between us and we'll be doing that in the form of a faculty retreat.

While that is hopeful, there is still the question [of] how do we model the kind of communication that you're talking about? How do we, as educators, effectively get that word out? What are your ideas about that?

GB: We are the role models and people that our students turn to. It's not dissimilar to the ways I think about young people.

Stephen Sondheim has a wonderful song, "Children Will Listen" from the show *Into the Woods* that goes "Be careful what you do. Children will listen. Be careful what you say. Children will hear," and that song resonates for me.

Our students are observing our behavior and assessing their own level of comfort or discomfort by how comfortable or uncomfortable we are in being able to go off script.

Sometimes, those of us who are uncomfortable can hide behind a syllabus. We can use the syllabus as if it were a shield, to avoid having conversations that make us uncomfortable, rather than seizing the moment when something has happened in the external world. [That is] to say, "Before we delve into what it was that I had planned to talk about today, I want to lift up and talk about what's just happened in X, Y, Z community," and then allow people, give people, that space to talk. We model that behavior.

KH: As a field director, I'm wondering if we can apply what you're saying to interactions field instructors have with students.

Might there be some prompts, or some encouragement that could come from our department about how to have these discussions with their students when these terrible events occur?

GB: That's a service that we could provide without question. [I did a piece recently before the beginning of the school year for the Huffington Post, directed at parents, on "How To Talk about Race."](#)

It gave some helpful suggestions about how to step into the conversation with one's children; to help them to think about what they're observing. And this was the post one year anniversary of Ferguson when things were percolating again.

It's being able to be open and honest. It is not necessarily having to have every answer, but it's about being able to raise questions to allow space for people to share their feelings.

And to have an opportunity to know that as a field department, we're able to step into those organizations and provide them with support to help them to think outside of their day to day operations.

KH: I couldn't agree more. One of the things that you will be doing for us is a professional development seminar focusing on this issue for our field instructors. The title of your talk is, "The Color of Fear; The Paradox of Race in the New Millennium." It will be another way to directly address the field instructors who are teaching our students out in the community.

GB: I'm hoping that it will also be an opportunity for people in the field to feel supported. There's an old hymn that says, "Come and lay your burdens down."

KH: Yes, that's my hope too.

GB: We need to provide that space for people to bring the burden of race and racism, to lay it down, to put it in a space where we can begin to look at it in a way where we don't have to be so defensive or guarded or protective.

The conundrum of race is that we're continuously bearing the cost and the burden of it.

KH: Right.

GB: Social work practitioners of color and white practitioners, for both it's a herculean task, but I think it's one that we as a profession are up to, and I'm looking forward to that conversation.

KH: Do you have any examples, Gary, in the classroom, any moments, where there has been a chance for a student to make that uncomfortable first step in raising one of these issues?

GB: I make sure that I start every class, bringing in the outside world into class. So, last semester for example I started one class by saying, "We need to talk about what's happening not necessarily in our backyard, but in Baltimore." I started the conversation by asking, "What questions do you have?" and "How do you see the role of social workers in this?" and watching my students, it was almost as if I had taken a weight off of them. They definitely wanted to talk.

KH: You said you can see the weight lifted, even as you talked about how you presented it, it's clear that the invitation, makes for a lot of safety. And I wonder, again, how we can continue to help people feel safe, even if very uncomfortable in approaching these very difficult topics.

GB: Recently, there has been violence right in our immediate neighborhood [...] in some ways safety is a fantasy or maybe a metaphor for having control and needing to make sense out of things.

KH: You're absolutely right. I think there's a myth that there can really be a sense of safety.

GB: Sometimes it can be overwhelming. As my late mother used to say, when you go out everyday, "You have to leave your house prayed up." Because you just don't know what's going to happen. And then you hear about incidents that are happening around the corner from you. Or you see something on the way home and you think, "Had I been a few minutes earlier, had I not taken the bus and walked, I would have been in the middle of something that I would not have been prepared for." But those are the realities. Those are the lived realities for the clients that we work with as well. So, we're getting a taste of the world that is really affecting our clients. We also have to attend to what's going on with each other, as our colleagues also don't feel necessarily "safe."

To think about colleagues of color who are worried about their interactions with authorities, with police, who are worried about loved ones and their interactions with police, who carry that burden, who don't have a chance to put it down.

KH: Whereas those of us in a privileged position don't need to give that a second thought.

GB: That is a privilege, but to be able to understand the disparity in the weight that's carried by some of us, compared to all of us.

KH: Right.

GB: It doesn't mean to make people feel guilty, but it does say sometimes you just want to at least have that disparity validated. Things aren't equal.

KH: That's right. I would imagine you are hearing these stories all the time. I wonder if you have an example to share.

GB: A young friend of mine, brilliant writer, an activist, someone I admire immensely, was coming home from a conference, at night, from the University of Massachusetts. He was pulled over for no reason by Massachusetts State Troopers. He happens to be Latino.

He did all of the right things. Kept his hands on the wheel. Said, "Yes, officer. How are you officer? No, officer. May I show you my registration, officer?" He did it by the book.

As the officer is looking around with his flashlight, flashing it in his eyes, two other police cars come

and surround his car. My friend hadn't been speeding. He hadn't been doing anything. What they could see in his back seat was his children's car seats.

And he thought, appropriately so, "I'm going to engage. I want people to see me as a person." And he says, "I'm sorry, officer, my car is messy. I'm a dad with three kids, my car is always a mess." You know, very kind of light, and thinking, "Let's connect as human beings." And the officer looked at him and said in a stern voice, without feeling, "I know what you're trying to do, and it's not working." He thought, "Well, I'm just trying to be a human being to another human being."

KH: And that was met with that kind of disdain?

GB: Disdain and dismissed, too. As if his humanity didn't matter.

KH: Right.

GB: And then he was let go. The policeman followed him, the state trooper followed him, until he got outside of [their] jurisdiction. Then this young man pulled over to the side of the road and basically had to pull himself together so he could go home.

He wrote very powerfully about what had happened to him. And I think, how many times has this happened over and over again?

KH: It's the proverbial tip of the iceberg. These are the stories that are going on all the time. We want our students aware of this.

GB: It's part of what has made this past year so unusual and it's been both an amazing opportunity, and it's also made it an exhausting year. It's a reality that is just not avoidable.

KH: As you're talking, Gary, I'm thinking about the fact that we educate our students within CSWE EPAS competencies, which are incorporated as our field evaluation competencies.

And very often we have field instructors who give their student a rating of Not Applicable on the competency that reads "Advanced human rights and social and economic justice." How might you respond to this?

GB: Well, first I'd chortle. And then I would have to say, "Do you understand what human rights and social justice are?"

I want them to think about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly Article 25 of

the Declaration, which includes the right to housing, to safety, freedom of movement, basic human rights. Those things are being violated over and over and over again in communities near and far. We're not immune to that here. According to an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) study of the Dudley Square area of Boston, of the approximate 42,000 residents of the area 38,000 residents have been stopped and frisked.

KH: Gary, so how do we help students and field instructors understand what a human rights and social justice perspective is in a clinical setting [and] in the context of a clinical MSW program? Do you have any thoughts about the student, for instance, who is working in a predominately white, suburban neighborhood, let's say in a health center working with people who do not represent diversity? How might you help a field instructor fashion this competency in that context?

GB: That's a great question. I would say that there's no town in America that I've ever been in, and I've traveled this country extensively, where I can't ask people, "Can you show me, the good neighborhood, the good section and the bad section of your community?" People can say, "Of course, I can show you." Then I'll ask the question, "Can you show me where the more well off people live?" and they can show me that. And by being able to do that, what they're helping me to see and hopefully helping themselves to see, is that there are socioeconomic divides and that poverty does exist among white people.

KH: Again, it's, a matter of helping our field instructors raise these issues as they're teaching their students.

GB: Exactly. Your students will be able to tell you, if you really go in and unpack, when they say, "Oh, I grew up in a place where there was not a lot of diversity." I'll say, "But [were] there class differences? Was there socioeconomic diversity?"

KH: I'm sitting here thinking about the city in which I grew up, an urban setting. It was divided into north, south, east, and west, and we all knew the implications.

GB: Exactly.

KH: And people always asked first, "What part of town do you live in?" And there was a story that was implicit in the answer.

GB: Exactly.

KH: And yet, I don't think I've ever thought about that. So, thank you. This whole discussion, Gary, is planting some seeds about things that we might do here in the field department to more fully

involve our field instructors in this important part of learning.

Gary, any closing thoughts about how we can help to raise [the] profile and importance of the issues we've discussed?

GB: I think that we have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. [I'll tell] one last story. Some dear friends recounted their Rabbi's recent talk at Rosh Hashanah services. The Rabbi raised the issue of the disproportionate impact of police brutality on communities of color, even though this wasn't a reality for those in his congregation. The Rabbi powerfully stated. "We cannot ignore what is going on to those around us." That's what I believe, and also, that's what our students are looking to us for.

KH: We need to bring these issues up even in contexts where they don't seem to be relevant, because [they're] always relevant.