

Embracing diversity: the struggle for justice

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Growing up poor and black in Brazil is no different than the experiences of my sisters and brothers in the Afro Atlantic Diaspora in the Americas and Caribbean. Embracing diversity is a struggle. I chose the word struggle because it reflects my experiences. Struggle has always preceded successes I achieved. I was the only student in my private English classes, coming from a low-income neighborhood. I was one of the few to pass the college entrance exams into the Economics program, I was the first in my family to graduate from college, to obtain a master's degree and a doctorate.

When I write Dr. Antonia Apolinario-Wilcoxon in my signature, my hand is held and guided by many who came before me. My ancestors comes from afar. My paternal grandfather owned land deeded to him and his family by the owners of my ancestors; my maternal grandfather was a successful business owner in the town of Sao Mateus, Brazil. When his wife, the love of his life passed, he turned to alcohol for comfort. My mother an only child rescued him. I grew up in the city of Vitoria, the capital city of the state of Espirito Santo, coastal Brazil. I am the product of a wave of families leaving the countryside hoping for opportunities in the big city. For my family it was both better jobs and better education for their four children.

I am Antonia Wilcoxon. I am an immigrant and have been for over 40 years. In 1979, I left behind my widowed mother and three siblings to follow my new husband, whom I had met as an American Field Service (AFS) student at Lake Crystal HS in Southern Minnesota.

I am a daughter, granddaughter, sister, cousin and a mother of two young men, I am proud to have my life. I have lived in the United States, in Minnesota, longer than I have lived in my hometown, Vitoria, Brazil. I am the product of favelas (slums or shantytown) and of dreams fulfilled. My mother was a young widow when my father passed, leaving his wife with young children ages eight through 18 months. I had to grow up fast. When you have the gift of reading and writing, it made me the helper of my asthmatic mom who needed me.

When I graduated from college, the statistics in Brazil counted me as one in 100. My odds were quite low. A full scholarship changed the course of a family's life forever. I am grateful to the Roth family who welcomed me into their farmstead and to the community who opened their arms to me.

From Marx and Engels writing on Class Struggles, to Frederick Douglass' foretelling of the Civil War: "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this, or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters." <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/> (retrieved 1 April 2020)

It is the critical consciousness of Paulo Freire (Brazilian educational theorist grounded in post-Marxist critical theory), that in order to achieve liberation, oppressor and oppressed need to come about the awareness of their victimization of the oppressive system. Society needs to work together to co-create new norms, rules, procedures and policies. The realization that we are not alone. The universalism and belonging that Dr. John Powell writes to instruct us into a better understanding of diversity. It is not a zero-sum game: as we are each one of us, vessels of the life force, the Creator, the Divine. Humans are nature and all of nature is interconnected. We are never in this world by ourselves. When we fail to believe that we share in the bounty of God's creation we are going to go without, we are challenging the Divine. We are never in this world by ourselves. In my cultural tradition, we believe that our ancestors' spirits are always with us, guiding, instilling wisdom, clarity and helping us make wise decisions.

At this time in our lives, as we learn to survive and thrive during a global epidemic, the spectrum of disparities become visible. The people showing the virus causing them serious illness, and even death are those often invisible but often there side by side with us: they keep our offices clean, wash the bathrooms we use, cook at the restaurants where we purchase food and unfortunately are the canary in the coalmine; their absence is only felt when they are no longer there.

It is with this image in my mind and heart that I offer this as we walk this journey together:

1. See me as a human being. I am here, I experience the same emotions as you. I will cry when sad and will be joyful when happy. We may lead separate lives. Ultimately, we are not so different. See my humanity.
2. My voice is as important as yours. The issues that cause you discomfort, may not cause me the same reaction, but if you look closely enough, my life as the "Other" is a daily experience of a thousand discomforts.
3. I am your sister. We have our origins in Africa, though our paths took separate directions, we will eventually come to the same end, we die alone and we only take with us memories of our humanity. And hopefully, no regrets.
4. A favorite quote from Maya Angelou, on being courageous, as these are times inviting us to be courageous in the face of challenges: "I am convinced that courage is the most important of all the virtues. Because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently. You can be kind for a while; you can be generous for a while; you can be just for a while, or merciful for a while, even loving for a while. But it is only with courage that you can be persistently and insistently kind and generous and fair."
5. Blessings on this sacred journey.