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## Honoring A Common Humanity: Maxims for Achieving Social Justice, Schweitzer Leadership Award Acceptance Remarks

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# HONORING A COMMON HUMANITY: MAXIMS FOR ACHIEVING SOCIAL JUSTICE

## SCHWEITZER LEADERSHIP AWARD\*

*Acceptance Remarks of* PROFESSOR EMILY A. BENFER†

OUR COMMON HUMANITY\*

*Zimbabwe*

**T**he first time I became intimately aware of the common humanity that pulses through all of us was as a Peace Corps volunteer. My first post was

Loyola Public Interest Law Reporter

in Mashaba, a small community in Zimbabwe on the boarder of Botswana. It was named for the red soil on the ground that seemed to reflect the flaming sky above.

At the time of my service, over 1 in 3 people in Zimbabwe were infected with HIV/AIDS.<sup>1</sup> To this day, Zimbabwe has one of the highest rates of AIDS orphans in the world.<sup>2</sup>

I was the first non-Zimbabwean to visit the village. Many thought a ghost or an angel had taken up residence. My assignment was to teach sustainable farming practices but the people to call upon me the most were dying of AIDS.

I would sit on a stool or on the clay floor of a hut next to a straw bed and listen. I listened to the women and men – some as young as fourteen and others aged by illness – who spoke or mumbled or cried in the lyrical clicks of a language I didn't understand. Perhaps they were confessing, perhaps they were asking for help, perhaps they were surrendering to death, or maybe they only wanted company in the final journey. I will never know and I never asked.

But as I took each outstretched hand, a collection of fragile bones, in my own, I was deeply affected by our common experience and the traditions of life and death that were universal.

### *Thailand*

I experienced similar truths as a volunteer in Thailand. There, I found the soft, small hand of a nine year-old little girl in mine. Though we couldn't communicate with words, Mue became a fast friend.

At first, she extended the offer of friendship through timid smiles and gifts. She brought me bunches of bananas, hard-shelled bugs, and flowers freshly ripped from the ground. Then, she brought me books, as many books as she could fit between her outstretched hands and chin. She was determined to teach me Thai and, every day, read to me from her school books.

Eventually, my 9-year-old teacher succeeded and I did learn to speak Mue's language. But, even before language and without a common culture, I under-

stood her clearly from the very beginning. Every time she looked at me, I saw with perfect clarity the brilliant and pure love of a child.

In these most foreign of environments, sitting on a stool under the red African sky or surrounded by rice fields in Thailand, the humanity within each of us was unmistakable. Illness and fear and death, hope and laughter and love are truths of the human experience. In this way, I came to deeply understand our interconnectedness and the ties that bridge us from the very beginning.

Once we become aware of the common humanity pulsing through all human beings, in Dr. Schweitzer's words, "[we] feel[ ] compelled to approach all life with the same reverence [we] have for [our] own." As a result, "all life becomes an integral part of our own experience."<sup>3</sup> This means we take up the suffering, the disparities, the inequality faced by people as though our own. We recognize the individual life captured by a statistic, presented in a case or sitting before us in an exam room.

#### RESPONSIBILITY TO OTHER HUMAN BEINGS

For me, like all of you, this awareness means I could not ignore the dark and heavy *shadows* of injustice or inequality cast over humanity.

I could not stand by while infants and children slept in cars and under free-ways, risking their lives to the elements.<sup>4</sup>

I cannot ignore the 1.9 million people – each an individual - in Illinois who live in poverty<sup>5</sup> and suffer the devastating consequences of the social determinants of health on a daily basis.

This means that the 15.9 million children who are at risk of malnutrition in the United States<sup>6</sup> and the 1 in 4 children in Illinois who have lead poisoning<sup>7</sup> are each a child of mine.

Ultimately, the quality of society and our shared future depends upon this recognition and response to the integral nature of all of our experiences.

Loyola Public Interest Law Reporter

### *Health Justice Project*

But I could not and have not and – if I can help it – will never go it alone. In fact, this award is truly shared by hundreds of individuals, each offering a unique contribution.

The Health Justice Project<sup>8</sup> would not be possible without the leadership of physicians like Dr. Peter Mayock<sup>9</sup> or Dr. David Buchanan<sup>10</sup> of Erie Family Health Center or the unparalleled support of Loyola University Chicago School of Law<sup>11</sup> and the Beazley Institute for Health Law and Policy,<sup>12</sup> especially Dean David Yellen<sup>13</sup> and Professor Larry Singer.<sup>14</sup> It wouldn't be possible without the tireless and innovative work of our Rodin Clinical Teaching Fellow and Supervising Attorney, Allyson Gold.<sup>15</sup> These champions of health justice understand the value of interprofessional teamwork and clinical education and the importance of preparing students to become stewards of society.

One hundred and twenty-four students of law, social work, public health and medicine, 104 medical professionals at Erie Family Health Center and our partners at AIDS Legal Council of Chicago,<sup>16</sup> Lawyers Committee for Better Housing,<sup>17</sup> Equip for Equality<sup>18</sup> and the National Immigrant Justice Center<sup>19</sup> work tirelessly to overcome the social determinants of health for the patients of Erie Family Health Center.

The majority of these patients are Hispanic or Latino and living below the poverty line. These children, adults, elderly, and caregivers confront injustice on a daily basis. Statistically, they have 1 to 3 unmet, civil legal needs per household.<sup>20</sup>

Together, we have addressed the root causes of poor health for nearly 1400 low-income people and their families in Chicago. We remove the conditions – such as infestations and mold – that cause respiratory distress. We compel the renovation of lead paint or the rapid transfer to safe housing. We address barriers to health related to public benefit denials and income and immigration status. We provide resources and educate patients about their rights.

With Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine and public health program,<sup>21</sup> we train future health leaders to evaluate the underlying structures and policies thwarting progress. The students think critically about the causes

of social determinants of health and contribute to public policy that will advance health justice.

We do this because we recognize that social justice and social equity require the provision of health. Health is essential to our well-being and overcoming the effects of disadvantage. Without it, we cannot accomplish what we see as our responsibility and agency to do. We cannot access opportunity or realize our fullest potential. Every human being should have that chance.

### *Maxims*

Standing here, in Jane Addams Hull House, where a community of immigrants from diverse backgrounds and experiences came together under the common ties of humanity, where the residents advocated for legislative reform on child labor, women's suffrage, healthcare and immigration policy, where the roots of what we know as social welfare today grew and blossomed,<sup>22</sup> I would like to carry forward that tradition of reform and offer a few maxims to help us realize the ideal world we envision. I learned most of these from my teacher, mentor and dear friend, Florence Wagman Roisman.<sup>23</sup>

*First*, in your work, pay attention to themes and patterns and commit to making structural remedies.<sup>24</sup> To most effectively address one patient's needs, we must address the elements common to many. For example, patients experiencing respiratory distress, or dermatitis due to bug bites, or developmental delay due to elevated blood lead levels may all be affected by substandard housing conditions. In these situations, advocacy for healthy homes will result in lasting health and create change that treats the illness, not the symptoms. How can we throw away the "Band-Aids" and make it less likely that the same kind of problem will arise for other people?

*Second*, educate!<sup>25</sup> Tell your stories. Tell your patients' stories. Do not assume that other people have seen what you see or know what you know. Educate your family. Educate your friends. Write letters to the editor. Use digital media. Sometimes the consequence of poverty and inequality, especially when coupled with poor health, is becoming invisible and voiceless. Educate so that you might ensure others are heard when they can't speak for themselves.

*Third*, vehemently reject the status quo.<sup>26</sup> If it is "reasonable" is to cut 8 billion dollars from the food stamp program and to deny people other basic human

necessities, then it is time for us to be unreasonable. As Professor Roisman taught me, it is time for us to think outside the box by checking off “none of the above.”<sup>27</sup> The current state of affairs must be unacceptable and we must not be complacent.

*Fourth*, believe in the next generation of change makers<sup>28</sup> – people like Rachelle Sico and Elisa Pleasant to whom I am most grateful for their comments and who set an extraordinary example through their outstanding efforts to improve health. Young people are critical to social change. Their idealism is inspired and focused on imagining a new world. They are capable of achieving great things, as demonstrated by our very own Schweitzer Fellows. It is incumbent upon all of us to train the students and fellows to apply their visionary and leadership capacity to achieving a future free of disadvantage, health inequity and social injustice. Let us embolden them with our support and mentorship.

*Fifth*, celebrate the victories and the people who make them possible. We are all indebted to the people who believe in us, who encourage us, who give us the support we need to do this important health justice work. For me, I am grateful to my supportive husband and family who encourage me to look beyond obstacles and dream even bigger and to my 17-month-old son who inspires me to make this world a more just and peaceful place.

*Sixth*, always remember that your contribution matters. In Gandhi’s words, “Almost everything you do will seem insignificant, but it is important that you do it. We must be the change we wish to see.”<sup>29</sup>

*Seventh*, “take the long view.”<sup>30</sup> In his book, *Arguing About Slavery*, William Lee Miller wrote “for slavery to be ended there had to be some individual human beings who did what they did . . . There were some people – a very small number, on the margin of society, condemned and harassed – who nevertheless made it the first order of their life’s business to oppose American slavery, and to insist that it was a grotesque evil that should be eliminated, and . . . in a little over thirty years, it was.”<sup>31</sup>

In the same way these words apply to ending slavery and segregation, they apply to ending poverty and health disparities in the United States today. If individual human beings commit to their elimination, it will be. It may not be

today or tomorrow, but it will be. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”<sup>32</sup>

*Eighth*, work together. We will be more successful if we break down silos and draw upon our collective knowledge and experiences to respond to the health disparities plaguing our society and affecting our patients and clients in dangerous ways. In the same way we are tied to each other, we need each other in order to protect humanity and guarantee its future. Everyone in this room has something to contribute. It is up to us to find out what that is and to support one another in our quest for health justice.

*Ninth*, believe that change is possible. Tap into your youthful idealism. Set your eyes on the prize and believe. No matter what they tell you, no matter how high the barrier before you, believe. And then get to it!

*Finally*, wherever you are – on the floor of a mud hut, surrounded by Thai books, or on the city streets of Chicago – honor the spark of divinity in every human being, including you. When you see people in despair and learn of the sobering statistics, the stories of poverty and illness and the people swept into the shadows, recall that all life is an integral part of your experience. Every time we appreciate and value the humanity in another by standing up and stepping in, we fan that spark, increasing its glow.

Imagine. If we add these glowing sparks together, the brilliant light will most certainly cast out the shadows of the world.

Thank you.

*\*Emily Benfer received the inaugural Albert Schweitzer Leadership Award on February 27, 2014 at the Jane Adams Hull House in Chicago Illinois after a year long nomination and selection process. The award honors an individual who has done significant work to mitigate the social determinants of health in their community, and whose commitment to service has influenced and inspired others. Professor Benfer received the award for her work as the founder and director of the Health Justice Project clinic and the important strides she and her students have made in improving the health of low-income individuals and families in Chicago. Professor Benfer was nominated for the award by a former student, Elisa Pleasant.*

Loyola Public Interest Law Reporter

†*Emily A. Benfer is a Clinical Professor of Law and the founder and director of the Health Justice Project, a medical-legal partnership clinic, at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.*

*\*Prior to speech the audience was addressed: "Thank you. I am deeply humbled by this incredible honor. To be recognized in this way by Health and Medicine Policy Research Group, the Chicago Schweitzer Fellows Program, my students and this community of incredibly smart, dedicated, experienced, creative individuals is overwhelming and profoundly meaningful to me. I revere Albert Schweitzer, not only for his work and life of effective service and constant action, but also for his commitment to honoring the "spark of divinity" in every human being. Ultimately, I believe it is recognition of and respect for that spark – our humanity – that is at the root of all justice work and necessary for the achievement of health justice." When referring to the spark of divinity, I am describing Albert Schweitzer's philosophy of the "Reverence for Life." ALBERT SCHWEITZER, ESSENTIAL WRITINGS (2005). This phrase also describes a central tenet of Quaker belief that every human being possesses a "divine spark" or "inner light." SCOTT LIELE, 46 PAGES: THOMAS PAINE, COMMON SENSE, AND THE TURNING POINT TO INDEPENDENCE 29 (2004). I first learned of this vivid phrase when Florence Wagman Roisman awarded the 2011 Cushing Niles Dolbear Lifetime Service Award by the National Low Income Housing Coalition. See Florence Wagman Roisman, A Challenge to Bank of America, Speech presented at the National Low Income Housing Policy Conference during acceptance of the Cushing Niles Dolbear Award, March 29, 2011 available at <http://mckinneylaw.iu.edu/instructors/roisman/A%20Challenge%20to%20Bank%20of%20America%20%20Florence%20Wagman%20Roisman%20March29%202011.pdf>.*

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NOTES

1 I began my Peace Corps service in Zimbabwe in 2000. It is estimated that the adult HIV/AIDS prevalence in Zimbabwe was 33.7% in 2001. JOINT UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME ON AIDS (UNAIDS), REPORT ON THE GLOBAL HIV/AIDS EPIDEMIC (2002) available at [http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2002/brglobal\\_aids\\_report\\_en\\_pdf\\_red\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2002/brglobal_aids_report_en_pdf_red_en.pdf)

2 UNICEF, *Towards an AIDS-Free Generation* 81 (2013) [http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2002/brglobal\\_aids\\_report\\_en\\_pdf\\_red\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2002/brglobal_aids_report_en_pdf_red_en.pdf)

3 ALBERT SCHWEITZER, REVERENCE FOR LIFE 59 (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

## No. 3 • Symposium 2013

4 From 2005-2007, I served as an Arnold & Porter Equal Justice Works Fellow at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. Equal Justice Works, Emily Benfer at <http://equaljusticeworks.org/node/1993>. During this time, I represented homeless families. Many of the clients slept in cars, in apartments without heat, or in other dangerous conditions. Today, there are nearly 800 homeless families in Washington, DC and little interest on the part of the local government to increase funding for homeless prevention or homeless response. See Aaron Davis and Brigid Schulte, D.C. Homeless Crisis Puts in Play Gray's Record as City Steward, Washington Post, Feb. 9, 2014 at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-homeless-crisis-puts-in-play-grays-record-as-city-steward/2014/02/09/098d518a-8dca-11e3-95dd-36ff657a4dae\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-homeless-crisis-puts-in-play-grays-record-as-city-steward/2014/02/09/098d518a-8dca-11e3-95dd-36ff657a4dae_story.html). See generally Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless at <http://www.legalclinic.org>. For more information about homelessness in the United States, visit the National Coalition for the Homeless at <http://nationalhomeless.org/>.

5 SOCIAL IMPACT RESEARCH CENTER, ILLINOIS'S 33%: REPORT ON ILLINOIS POVERTY (2013) at [http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Illinois\\_33percent\\_PovertyReport\\_FINAL-copy.pdf](http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Illinois_33percent_PovertyReport_FINAL-copy.pdf)

6 Feeding America at [http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/child-hunger-facts.aspx#\\_edn2](http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/child-hunger-facts.aspx#_edn2) citing Coleman-Jensen, A., Nord, M., & Singh, A. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2012. Table 1B*. USDA ERS (2013).

7 ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH, PREVENTING AND SCREENING FOR CHILDHOOD LEAD POISONING: A REFERENCE GUIDE FOR PHYSICIANS AND HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS - GET THE LEAD OUT at [http://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/Lead\\_PhysiciansGuide.pdf](http://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/Lead_PhysiciansGuide.pdf). For more information about lead poisoning in Illinois and lead poisoning prevention, visit Lead Safe Illinois at <http://www.lead-safeillinois.org>.

8 For more information about the Health Justice Project, visit <http://www.luc.edu/healthjustice>.

9 Dr. Peter Mayock, internal medicine doctor at Erie Family Health Center, is a champion of health justice and an active member of the Health Justice Project medical-legal partnership. Erie Family Health Center, Peter Mayock at <http://www.riefamilyhealth.org/peter-mayock-md>.

10 Dr. David Buchanan, Chief Clinical Officer at Erie Family Health Center, was instrumental in developing the Health Justice Project and the medical-legal partnership between Erie Family Health Center and Loyola University Chicago School of Law. His involvement and support make our success on behalf of patients possible. Erie Family Health Center, David Buchanan, <http://www.riefamilyhealth.org/about-erie/leadership-team>.

11 Loyola University Chicago School of Law at <http://www.luc.edu/law>.

12 The Beazley Institute for Health Law and Policy is a nationally recognized center dedicated to the education of health law leaders and policymakers, and to the study and furtherance of the health law field. The Health Justice Project is housed within the Beazley Institute for Health Law and Policy. Beazley Institute for Health Law and Policy at <http://www.luc.edu/law/centers/healthlaw/index.html>.

13 Loyola University Chicago School of Law, David Yellen at <http://www.luc.edu/law/faculty/yellen.shtml>.

14 Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Larry Singer at <http://www.luc.edu/law/faculty/fulltime/singer.shtml>.

15 Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Allyson Gold at <http://www.luc.edu/law/faculty/facultyandstaffbydepartment/gold.shtml>.

16 AIDS Legal Council of Chicago protects the legal rights of individuals living with HIV/AIDS. See Aids Legal Council of Chicago at <http://www.aidslegal.org>.

## Loyola Public Interest Law Reporter

17 Lawyers Committee for Better Housing protects the right to safe, decent and affordable housing on a non-discriminatory basis and access to such housing for low and moderate income households. See Lawyers Committee for Better Housing at <http://www.lcbh.org>.

18 Equip for Equality advances the human and civil rights of children and adults with physical and mental disabilities in Illinois. See Equip for Equality at <http://www.equipforequality.org>.

19 National Immigrant Justice Center is dedicated to ensuring human rights protections and access to justice for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. See National Immigrant Justice Center at <http://www.immigrantjustice.org>.

20 Households in Illinois that experience one legal problem face an average of 3.5 legal issues. In 2003, almost half of low-income households experienced one or more legal problems. CHICAGO BAR FOUNDATION, LEGAL AID SAFETY NET: A REPORT ON THE LEGAL NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME ILLINOISANS (2005) at <http://chicagobarfoundation.org/about/publications/legal-aid-safety-net/>.

21 Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine Public Health Policy and Management Program at <http://stritch.luc.edu/mph/public-health-policy-health-management>.

22 See Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, About Jane Addams at [http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/\\_learn/\\_aboutjane/aboutjane.html](http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/_learn/_aboutjane/aboutjane.html); Social Welfare Project, Hull House at <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/organizations/hull-house-circ-1910/>; SHANNON JACKSON, LINES OF ACTIVITY: PERFORMANCE, HISTORIOGRAPHY, HULL-HOUSE DOMESTICITY 250 (University of Michigan Press 2000).

23 Through her inspired teaching, Professor Roisman fueled my passion for social justice and gave me the skills necessary to effect change. Through her support and mentorship as her student and every day since I left her classroom, I am reminded of the importance of every person's contribution in the face of injustice. Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law, Florence Wagman Roisman at <http://mckinneylaw.iu.edu/faculty-staff/profile.cfm?Id=47>.

24 This maxim is adapted from Florence Wagman Roisman's sixth principle of effective advocacy: "Look for structural remedies; try to create change that isn't just a band-aid but makes it less likely that precisely the same kind of problem will arise for other people." Florence Wagman Roisman, *Thirteen Principles of Effective Advocacy*, 63 RUTGERS L. REV. 985, 991.

25 See Roisman, *supra* note 27 at 995. ("The eleventh principle is: Educate, educate, educate.")

26 See Roisman, *supra* note 27 at 992. ("The seventh principle is: Be unreasonable.")

27 See Roisman, *supra* note 27 at 993.

28 See Roisman, *supra* note 27 at 995.

29 Mahatma Gandhi Quotes, Think Exist, [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/mahatma\\_gandhi/3.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/mahatma_gandhi/3.html); THE YALE BOOK OF QUOTATIONS 299 (Fred R. Shapiro, ed. 2006) *quoted in* Roisman, *supra* note 27 at 996.

30 See Roisman, *supra* note 27 at 997. ("The twelfth principle is: Take the long view.")

31 WILLIAM LEE MILLER, ARGUING ABOUT SLAVERY: THE GREAT BATTLE IN THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS 513 (1996) *quoted in* Roisman *supra* note 27 at 998-999.

32 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here? In JAMES M. WASHINGTON, ED., A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. 252 (1986).