

Don't Read This: One Higher Education Administrator's Perspective on the Urgency of Emptiness and Social Justice

Brian Mistler, Administrator, *Humboldt State University*

Keywords: higher education, administration, privilege, inequality

Don't read this. Perhaps, that's too strongly worded. I have found one has usually to discover truth oneself rather than taking anyone's advice. Thus, what I write here is intended as description of my understanding and not prescriptive for anyone else's. Though, I suppose I do actually offer two "recommendations," only intended for those who are seeking that sort of thing. The first (again) is: don't read this. Seriously. There are so many other better things you could read or do with your time. And, the second is I have found it helpful in moving towards social justice to consciously cultivate emptiness, which I will talk more about after giving some background. The short version is I have discovered that receptivity and unlearning is a prerequisite for certain kinds of knowing which involved paradigmatically (incommensurably, even) different or otherwise radically new perspectives. And, especially in such domains, I can't really teach you anything you don't already have access to within yourself at some level. I am offering here my individual (and non-generalizable) thoughts, and only really at the moment I am writing this (meaning I may even disagree with myself at other times as I change and grow; I would ask you for the benefit of the doubt and to please hear this intention if it feels like I am saying something otherwise).

If you do read on, I want to make clear to you that I do not claim anything in this article is true.

It's not intended to be true, and I admit I have found truth a somewhat elusive object, resistant to expression in language. At the same time, I wouldn't say it's false either. I guess, rather than true, much like Wittgenstein or William James, I think of most things as useful or not. Yet, while it sometimes feels useful to me in my own process of self-growth to write, my believing it will be useful to you, without us having gotten to talk and my really understanding your individual needs, is much more than I am comfortable saying. And, having eventually come to the conclusion that so many of the things I've been told to read in my life haven't been that helpful to my own self-development in the long-term, the odds are pretty good that this particular piece will not be useful to the average reader—so, I guess I feel empirically justified in advising you not to read this. What I can share from my own experience is that reading something like these words, if they had been written by someone other than me, would have been for me, if not useful, at least interesting, at several points in my life and career.

The first point in my life, and one where these words feel especially urgent to write, is right here, where I am right now, as a white, male administrator on a university campus; a first generation college student, "hetcis", able-bodied, of Judeo-Christian lower-middle class upbringing, a psychologist by training with a predominantly "Gestalt" therapeutic orientation, and a student for the past twenty-some-odd years

of Sufism in the Chishti-Inayati tradition, Chan Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta. This abbreviated demographic self-description has relevance to the topic at hand, deeply connected to issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and more, as well as crediting the broad sources of much of my understanding, yet it's far from an exhaustive list of the ways I have been shaped to perceive the world or the dimensions in which I largely fit (and at times not) in ways that ultimately mean power in our present society, and the ability to be surrounded predominantly by like-others in a range of situations, should I choose. I think owning at least some of my own identity, not as an immutable, reified truth—or even usually as one I internally “feel” all the time, so many of us, for example having been raised to see Judeo-Christian culture or “whiteness” as nearly transparent—but rather as a social reality in this moment with implications, for my perspectives, my stimulus value, and my life course. Because of these implications, I believe my speaking to my own positionality is important for any honest conversation we can have around social justice. In the paragraphs that follow I am going to focus especially on a small piece, though I believe there are many other dimensions that need to be addressed with similar urgency. As I begin, I should also be very clear I cannot and do not claim to speak for any group—race, class, gender, or otherwise. Whites, for example, are no more a monolithic, heterogeneous group than any other identity; within-group variation is always greater than between-group variation.

This being true, whenever I find myself inclined to stereotype or group experiences together, I urge myself to develop habits that push these implicit biases into conscious awareness and to reconnect with compassion and “beginner's mind”—to cultivate emptiness—and listen. I find myself in many spaces where I am convinced being present, but following rather than leading, and making a conscious effort, when it is not habit, to take up as little “space” as my fragile ego can tolerate, is exactly what's

called for. For me, when I hear from anyone else about their experience, even if it feels foreign to my own at one level, I can usually resonate at minimum with the feeling of being “stuck,” often in-between a range of demands and ideals it feels impossible to meet. Accepting that there is no point of purity on which to stand as an inherent limit to all acts of criticism, I find a perpetual challenge, yet a tremendously freeing one, when I use it to refocus myself on pragmatic construction (readers ignoring my advice to stop reading, will find successive evidence of many blind spots in this piece; I would never write if I waited to fix them all first, right?). Connecting with this archetypally sandwiched-vantage point of “universal-middleness” shared with others helps me breath better in that way that, for me, only feeling seen and understood can. Breathing is one of my personal metrics of truth, I should disclose, and experiences which alleviate a sense of isolation and lighten the burdensome habit of perseveration on my own selfish needs and feeling misunderstood, frees again my energy to be receptive to understanding others.

This receptivity, and the resulting understanding of others it allows, is so important to me. It is crucial for my own ability to see my inextricably ecological co-dependent-existence shared with all of creation, and especially with other sentient beings. And, it helps me to make increasingly conscious the ways in which my own privilege is not enjoyed by so many of those other beings to which I have inextricable ties. By “privilege”, I mean the benefits I experience as a result of living in a system that was largely designed by and for those who share most of the identities that society readily attributes to me—notably gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, size, ability, race, humanness, and education. While many of these identities exist on a spectrum, or in the case of some like race may have no underlying physical reality substantiating our constructed and shifting phenotypic categories, the reality is that heterosexism, cisgenderism, sexism or misogyny, racism, and other prejudices are all

very real. And, while I personally may not want to think of myself as a racist or bigot—as you would guess, I abhor the idea—I cannot rid myself of the unconscious biases that myriad research studies have shown each of us has introjected in some way, quite against the better angels of our conscious will in most cases for those of us working in higher education. Equally, I disdain with my whole being the trespasses, outright thefts, human enslavement, and other egregious acts on a long list of moral crimes committed by those who shaped the world into its present state of tremendous privilege for these groups into which I, myself, can easily fit—even if I am not directly of their lineage. I find some white people in America, including especially, for example, those of Jewish or Irish descent (both categories in which I include myself) get stuck at this point if I don't add this—that far from horrible things being committed by all of my/our ancestors, some members of my historical “tribe(s)” (like some of yours, almost universally, whatever your heritage), have at times themselves been the victims of heinous acts of violence and even enslavement themselves. Yet, and this is critical, even though this may be true, I cannot disavow myself from the inherited proceeds of this history and the ways in which I daily benefit living in this place, at this time, as it currently operates. This is perhaps even more clear to me when I look at my sex and gender—as we have all had male and female ancestors both—yet clearly as male-born and male-identified, today, I have a better chance in many places of making more money for the same work, being listened to in many contexts, facing less harassment, and having legislatures that pass laws that respect my needs more than if I were female, just to name a few privileges. And what did I do to deserve this male-ness?

I sometimes think of it like a man who had a million dollars fall on his head in childhood, only to discover later in life, after having spent half of it, that the money came from a bank robbery—a robbery in which others were injured, imprisoned, and killed. On discovering this, how

can one not feel an urgent obligation to use what remains of the good fortune to fight for justice? The urge does not arise exactly from a sense of guilt or a desire to atone for the robbery I did not personally commit in the past, but rather from empathy, compassion, and a deep sense gratitude and connectedness in the present. Gratitude for the grace of my fortune and for the opportunity to be in a position where I might use my privilege as an ally to support and amplify the voice of my fellow beings who have less privilege in any context and to whom I am connected. And, if I was told that others with similar good fortune perhaps have not worked as hard or sacrificed as much to ensure future returns, and spent their whole million dollars entirely (certainly I “deserve” what remains more than them, don't I?), it does not relieve me of the happenstance of my original undeserved “leg up.” I must also be conscious of the compound interest on this childhood privilege that I continue to collect on daily—things as simple as access to information or technology as a child, not available to those with less privilege, that made even elementary school easier, which made high school easier, which made getting scholarships for college easier, which made getting a higher paying job easier—and even when I was working and going to school, I could get home safely and then focus on the next exam rather than taking care of younger siblings or cooking for the family, and all of this has meant greater housing, job, and food-security/sovereignty later in life that continues to make things easier. Did I invest my privilege well at each point? Absolutely. I'm not arguing for the absence of the role of personal responsibility in determining equity or the entire elimination of all merit-based outcomes. Positionality is quite complicated—intersectional and fluid—and I don't mean to claim that my or your life has been easy; it's uphill for most of us in our own way at various times. But, surely I must recognize that in addition to my own daily hard work, I continue also to collect interest daily on a series of well-invested past benefits not available to many

others who all have worked at least as hard or harder than I have—many, much harder. I must also realize that implicit bias can work against a level playing field, if it's not properly checked. I find conscious self-reflection on these realizations can help to foster genuine compassion for and connection with those who are equally deserving yet less privileged in the present societal structure. When I feel this connection most palpably, and my sense of self expands accordingly, the act of working for others feels almost selfish—the same as using my arm to scratch my back; whatever part can reach the itch at the moment, naturally does, with no thought of self or other.

In this context, and benefiting as I and others like me do from so many privileges, what I have to say next will feel perhaps especially odd. It is that, at times, I still feel like an outsider myself. Even when I'm readily identified by others as a member of the visible majority group, I still at times have this nagging feeling of non-belonging. What I know, however, is that because of my privilege this sense of not fitting in is limited for me generally to some dissatisfaction on the higher end of Maslow's hierarchy. You see, while I may struggle in a situation where my higher-order interests or voice is not honored, or at times feel "afraid" speaking up about an issue in a group of people I perceive unsympathetic to my perspective, or may even worry about the reaction to my confronting language or policy I find harmful, rarely do I need to worry that my not-belonging—self-perceived or attributed by others—will present a threat to my physical safety. However, this isn't true for many others. It's not true for those in a same-sex relationship who, depending on where they live, have to worry about losing their child in a custody case, losing their access to retirement benefits, or their ability to visit their partner in the hospital. It's not true for trans-identified individuals who have to worry they'll be beaten or denied access to required medical care. It's not true for a person of color who is afraid an interaction with the

police over an issue someone in the same situation who has my skin color wouldn't think twice about, will put their life in jeopardy. It's not true for the child of an undocumented parent who fears they or their family will be deported, and their dreams of university graduation will turn to nightmares of their family torn apart. And, while no group is immune to being the target of prejudice or unjust discrimination, it is clear that these issues faced by some groups are more dangerous, more pervasive, and very urgent.

Being reminded of this fact—the ways in which my own actual safety is itself largely safe from not belonging—is especially helpful for me at times when I do feel like an outsider. Given this reality of the pervasiveness of experience and the ways in which so much public dialogue is already devoted to discussing the experience of those in the majority, I have found it's important I manage my own feelings of pain in specific ways. Certainly repressing them permanently isn't a good option. Neither, however, is expressing them every time others share their own pain with me. And, while life is not a suffering contest—all pain is real and incommensurable in some way—reacting to the pain of an individual in the minority by sharing my pain, rather than uniting us in common experience, could very likely and quite understandably be felt as minimizing to individuals whose pain is connected to a fear of physical harm and chronic, systemic injustice in a way mine is only in very rare circumstances. This too helps me quell any desire to "play the devil's advocate." I have to fight my brain's desire to advance a parenthetical (even if, very legitimate) point in the interest of abstract consistency, when I remind myself how real, urgent, and scary the content of these conversations are for so many of the individuals I am talking with.

Thus, in some spaces I do my best to show up and be witness, and minimize the emotional space I take up. This allows the group, rather than focusing any energy on taking care of me, to devote full energy to others. And, it allows me to

focus my own energy on understanding others as well. Sometimes it means recognizing my own stimulus value and deciding not to show up, even when I want to or feel I am “one of the good ones,” allowing individuals a safe space to be, without having to manage the habituated and understandable reaction to a person of my apparent gender and skin color. And, then I find opportunities to do my own work and to be supportive in other ways; sometimes this means meeting with other white men, for example, and sharing my experiences and realizations with them. If you’re such a person, who fits into the majority but also, like me at times, needs to speak about your own struggles and pain, you may consider finding a group of similarly identified (let’s say white, in this case) people you trust and having this conversation with them. And, when I am in any kind of group, I do my best to focus on supportive breathing, and on slowly filling in a few more embarrassingly large and persistent blind spots.

If you are not in a position of such privilege and identify as an individual who has regularly had these experiences of physical danger or minimization—if you have directly lived the things I can only hint at here and all those I don’t even list—then you know immediately the inadequacy of my ability to capture it. If this is your situation, know that I will only become more embarrassed at my poor ability to recount the awful realities you know first-hand if you continue to read this. In some sense words can never capture horror, I know. And, to be absolutely clear, if I am writing for anyone besides myself, it is for others with privilege similar to my own—speaking to other white men, especially—if this isn’t you, please forgive my inadequacies and continue on your path, I do not claim to speak about your experience or teach anything. So, with all of my insistence it’s not worth reading, then why do I write? Something about writing helps a side of my self talk to another side of myself, or to myself across time, so I type on. And, I do so acknowledging my limits, for the occasional reader for whom this

writing may prompt something they find helpful. Nevertheless, I say to anyone still reading who hasn’t had these experiences, if you want to understand it, don’t read this—instead, read something written by a person who has lived these pains. And don’t just read. If you are wanting to understand better, seek to discover with that wise part of yourself that is most receptive the wisdom of all the forms of expression—the stories and poems, the songs and wordless music, pre-composed or improvised, the plays and movies and all the dance—all of the art which bears witness to pain and joy alike, and has the power to convey its transformational knowledge to not just your judgmental mind, but your whole being. And while I could fill pages with those such works that have spoken to me in my life, my list would quickly become outdated and it’s quite unnecessary in today’s age of bountiful access to information. If you don’t know where to start ask almost anyone who you perceive as “other”, pull on any thread, and follow it deeper. Ask someone who has lived it, or if you want to spare them one more burden, conduct a quick search and read something by any of the people who have spent their lives studying exactly this, and then even if (or especially if) it is uncomfortable, be receptive to what you find.

Is it tautological to suggest that for this receptive investigation to be most useful, one benefits from cultivating receptivity? Like any which is capable of holding something else, the ability to be receptive is characterized by emptiness. And naturally the question arises, “how do we develop a capacity for emptiness?” But, perhaps this is not exactly the most efficient way to approach to problem. To aim at the creation of emptiness is paradoxical to the point of paralyzation for most of us, and suggests an action when what I have found works best is non-action—non-doing, because the emptiness is not to be created, but to be uncovered—not to be added like a painting, but to be brought to the surface as a sculptor does by chiseling away the unnecessary part of a brick of stone to reveal that

which already exists within. And, this creative emptiness is so near and accessible that the technique is fairly straightforward.

Thought straightforward, what I will suggest next will nevertheless feel quite strange to most. Certainly I would not try to stop you from communing with and supporting others. Go witness and testify, go be an ally, and hold spaces and listen, and be a tool for change in the world. All of these are far superior to what you're doing at this moment—reading this. And, in my own ignorance I certainly am not able to tell you where best to direct your energy for the critically urgent needs of social action, which of course you must discover within yourself and your community. People are dying and sitting alone won't cut it. But, before you do take action as a well-meaning ally, I do want to urge you to do your best to hear the “whole story;” to listen enough that your help is hacking at the roots and not just the branches. I will share that I have found in my own life, and more convincingly what I understand to have been important to a great many of those who have had a lasting positive impact on human consciousness—that before or perhaps amidst these activities each of us will benefit, as will the whole of the sentient and non-sentient world, if we can make time to cultivate receptive being. This is perhaps the most pragmatically idealistic, radically incremental, and patiently urgent suggestion I can offer those who feel stuck and are looking for immediate next steps; it is the only piece of unqualified advice I have, apart from suggesting you not read this text. Of course, if you didn't follow that advice I suspect most of you will not adhere to this suggestion either, which is probably best as your own truth is more appropriate for you than mine. But, perhaps there will be one or two who come to this moment already pulled in this direction, and my raising it for you once more you will find helpful. If you wish to begin or resume this practice you need set aside as little as ten minutes a day. Or, as the wisdom goes, if you don't have ten minutes a day you may want to set aside 20 minutes.

How will you spend it? Just sitting. You may think of this sitting as actively cultivating receptivity or intentionally reconnecting across the illusory disconnections mind and ego have formed. Though, with so many purposeful activities, I have found there is great benefit to sitting with no purpose. Sitting and letting go, even letting go of the desire to let go, so that the natural emptiness inside may emerge. There is no shortage of teachers on the subject and I trust you will be wise in your selection. There are many approaches, but my own favorite is the one that urges us not to stop thinking—a task for which the human brain/mind is not well suited—but instead of observe thoughts as a witness, as a diver does under the water looking up at the wave above while untouched, surrounded by stillness. Of course, these words are only a pointing to a truth beyond words, and any teaching on emptiness in language is packed with limits; making these words perhaps the least worth reading of all. But, I am told, opening to this perspective with enough practice eventually allows one to be caught in-between thoughts, in-between objects, and in this emptiness is the experience of consciousness without an object.

The cultivation of the experience of emptiness has also has another powerful advantage—the ability, or even desire, to give away power and other things most of the world calls riches or pleasure in the interest of higher-order wealth. Why would we voluntarily give away something we like? This question of voluntary sharing of power and resources is as basic as the childhood playground and one of the core challenges of transforming systems of consolidated power and profound inequity, such as those we find in today's world. I have found in my life that the adherence to zero-sum models (those that mean competition for part of the pie rather than cooperation to grow the pie) and a rush for disproportionation command of resources (which happens when you think you won't get enough pie), while at the same time I am aware others—human and non-human animals—suffer, inevitably ties me to a range of

unreal self-identities. It also prevents me from being fully connected with the rest of the world and leaves me fractured in an inaccurate view of myself. And, whenever such disparity is most extreme, a restful security remains impossible; all us-versus-them efforts to increase security in isolation can only result in an unending escalation of defenses, perceived by the other as offenses in need of increased defenses, on all sides. We must urgently develop those processes that lead towards a world that works for all of us and constructively develops a sustainable peace. Cultivating the various practices of developing emptiness and receptivity leads also to voluntarily giving away power and possession (a prerequisite to non-violent change) when we realize the ways in which holding on to fractured/facturing identities destroys environmental-peace, bodily-peace, and inner-peace, if we value even one of these. Among the additional benefits of receptiveness and the subsequent contact with reality which often follows, appears to be a higher-order perspective and form of persistent happiness somehow not denying but also not at odds with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. So, in this sense apparent selflessness can be aligned with very selfish benefits—it is only the notion of self which requires adjusting. If you are persuaded by the urgency of our work for social justice, perhaps you will also consider spending at least a few minutes making space for emptiness in your conscious awareness. If you do it earnestly, all I can say is that it will probably pay off much more than your reading this.

with part-time teaching, most recently as Medical House Staff Teaching Faculty at Manatee Memorial Hospital in Bradenton, Florida. A psychologist by training, Dr. Mistler has published widely on legal, physical-/mental-health, and social justice issues in top journals and served on the boards The Center for Collegiate Mental Health and NASPA Region VI, and editorial boards of The Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice and The Journal of College and University Student Housing. Brian received his bachelor's degrees from Stetson University, as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar to the U. K. his master's degree in conflict resolution from The University of Bradford, and his Ph.D in counseling psychology from the University of Florida.

Brian J. Mistler, Ph.D., is a higher education and healthcare administrator, currently Executive Director of Student Health and Wellbeing Services at Humboldt State University. Previous appointments at institutions (both large and small) include: Director of Health, Counseling Center Director, Associate Dean of Students, and Title-IX Coordinator/Legal Compliance Officer, along