

LUNA JIMÉNEZ SEMINARS & ASSOCIATES

Personal Transformation
Social Justice
Organizational Change



ABOUT US
SEMINARS
FACILITATION
SPEAKING
COACHING
CALENDAR
CONTACT



PROFILE



Please join us in welcoming Kati Campbell as the new Executive Coordinator for LJS & Associates. We are so thankful that Kati's commitment to increasing social justice led her to our organization. In her new position, Kati is charged with a very challenging task: managing LJS's office while keeping track of Nanci's training and travel calendar!

When the work day is done, you might catch a glimpse of Kati pedaling her bike around town on sunny days, cooking, and spending time with her family and friends.

As far back as she can remember Kati has had a passion for working to eliminate social injustice, especially poverty and racism. This commitment, combined with her desire to learn how to change institutional and governmental structures from the inside out inspired Kati to pursue a

NANCI'S LISTENING

The Hidden Costs of Privilege

by Nanci Luna Jimenez

When Peggy McIntosh first introduced the idea of unpacking the "Invisible Knapsack of Privilege" in her paper, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Knapsack* in 1988, it offered those of us in the field of diversity and racial justice a new way to think about power. The idea that a group with institutional power has access and privilege that they often can't see in their daily lives, yet it is clearly noticed by those who don't share the same institutional power, explained the unaware collusion with and benefits of institutional power. The title, *Invisible Knapsack* reinforced the notion that somehow privilege is very visible when you don't have it. This concept finally gave me a language to talk about what I'd felt as a woman of color when working with men or white people but couldn't yet name or acknowledge. However, as innovative as this concept of "privilege" was, it also came with certain limits that can hinder our capacity for a deeper understanding about the hidden costs of institutional power that impact both non-target and target groups.

Human Rights Not Special Rights

One of the problems with this prevailing notion of privilege is that when we view things like access to healthcare and public education, the ability to celebrate holidays that are important to you and your family without having to take personal or vacation days, or signs or written materials in a language you can read as "privileges," they get classified as special rights. How would we approach this conversation differently if instead we saw these as human rights? What if our goal was not to have more "privileged people," but rather more human equality?

What We Lose In The Effort to Get More

So-called "privilege" comes with unacknowledged loss. A college student in one of my workshops was talking about the brand new car her family recently bought for her—a scenario that was virtually unheard of for the rest of her classmates. As this woman went on about how she loved her car, especially the freedom it gave her to leave campus and go on long drives by herself, I started to hear the longing in her voice. Even though she knew this car was envied by her classmates, she envied something they had—connection. After listening deeply, I asked, "What's it like to be all alone in your new car?" She was caught completely off-guard by my question. Through her tears she spoke of how she would give up the car in a

degree in political science while working with non-governmental organizations around the world where she coordinated volunteers, built schools, and taught schoolchildren.

While Kati followed her heart to many war-ravaged and poverty-stricken international communities, she says her “work abroad instilled a greater sense of respect for my own community” and fostered her belief that “changing the world truly has to begin with yourself.”

Kati is looking forward to supporting LJS & Associates in our efforts to mentor future community change agents who are working to break free from poverty, institutional oppression, and racism. “I am honored to work in a field where I am part of changing the world for the better,” says Kati.

Upcoming Events:

Join LJS for our *Transformational Communication* public workshops. Follow the links below for more information on how to register and be a part of this powerful experience!

August 23rd and 24th Training in Portland, OR 2008

October 1st and 2nd Training in Groningen, the Netherlands 2008

second if she could have the kind of connections she saw between her fellow students who had less economic access. As she wrestled with my question, I could see her starting to grasp the enormous personal costs she'd previously denied because she had been confused into thinking that financial access brought her “privilege” (a new car)—rather than loss (lack of connection and isolation). This young woman shifted her and my own understanding of “privilege” and the need to identify the loss that accompanies institutional power.

The Illusion of “Acquiring” Privilege

The third problem with using this prevailing concept of “privilege” is that as long as we frame these rights as “privileges” they will be coveted. “Privilege” connotes “special,” “prized,” and “desired” and this makes “have-not” (target) groups instantly crave having them as well. Groups that are targeted by oppression try to assimilate in whatever ways society makes accessible, like cultivating the look and attitude or material trappings of the non-target group, with the goal of gaining power and credibility. They hope these material trappings will open the doors to “privilege” (read “access”). I have a dear friend who is an immigrant woman of color and was raised in poverty. She noticed that every time she opened her mouth to speak she was dismissed or ignored because her English is accented in a way that makes English speakers think she's less intelligent than they are. She couldn't change her skin color and despite many attempts, couldn't lose her accent, so instead she tried to buy entry to the world of “privilege.” She spent most of her hard-earned money on the latest fashions, expensive shoes and handbags. In the end, of course, Gucci didn't turn out to be the admission ticket she prayed it would be. You can imagine her heartbreak, and eventual anger, when she continued to be denied access to power, even after going into debt as she tried to assimilate through material acquisition. My friend's experience also shifted my understanding of “privilege” as a trap for target groups who use assimilation as an attempt to gain more of this coveted “privilege.”

Given these hidden costs of privilege, it becomes essential for us to shift the conversation from speaking of privilege as a benefit to talking about privilege as loss. When we can change our paradigm from one of special rights to human rights, when we can have honest dialogue about the pressures to assimilate in the search of so called privileges and the tremendous loss that comes with that assimilation, then we can begin, on a personal and societal level, to effectively challenge the power structures that reproduce the very inequities we seek to eliminate. What would it take for you to shift that paradigm in your life? Where have you tried to assimilate? What has been your deepest loss in that process? Thinking about the young woman in my workshop with the brand new car, what would you give up in a second if your life could become more authentic, more closely connected with other people?

As always, please send us your reflections—I look forward to listening to them.

Send your stories and comments to Nanci's Listening.

www.lunajimenezseminars.com