

## The Power of Difficult Dialogue

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Wait. What happened? At 16, I witnessed youthful innocence embody unearthly evils through the power of rape. My only sibling was assaulted, and the experience changed both our lives. I watched her entire personality transform from joy and positivity into sadness and anger. As she dealt with the initial “gut punch” of shock and depression, my sister unintentionally began to spew that energy onto me. For a long time, I was paralyzed with fear. I was scared to go out and enjoy life because I was afraid of what might happen to me. My sister’s violation resulted in pain and suffering not only to herself but to me and the rest of the village that supported her.

As my family sought justice for my sister, we speedily concluded there would be none. Learning my sister had been sexually assaulted was painful. It is well-recognized that survivors have no power, but this situation forced me to recognize that their loved ones do not have power either. I had no power, and that realization initially crushed my spirit. I often would stay up at night and cry, my mind clouded with questions just trying to make sense of this haunting situation. The world could not be this unfair – could it? This “just-less” form of justice lit a match in me that has yet to be extinguished. Quickly my crushed spirit turned into a fire that ignited the path for my future. My interests changed from innocent joys like Cheer and Homecoming dances to Women’s Rights and Title IX laws. My rose-colored view of the world changed.

My charge to safeguard others—specifically women—led me to Spelman College. While enrolled, I took a core course in the Comparative Women’s Studies department, which solidified my longing to major in Women’s Studies. Alongside this, I pursued a major in Economics. My double major critically shaped my worldview. Again, it affirmed that I was on the right path—one that was influenced by such a traumatic and life-changing experience. While the path was

everything I wanted, I recognized that it was not easy. I was required to showcase and apply my childhood values like hard work, respect, fairness, and inclusion of all persons no matter their race or gender. I was challenged to maintain my values and most importantly accept those with opposing views. Economics taught me to think analytically, weighing the risks and benefits of all possible outcomes, much like what an Attorney is challenged with doing daily.

As I matriculated through college, I found myself speaking out for women in all instances as I began to step outside of my shell. I joined Spelman College's Student Government Association in speaking at the Georgia State capital to representatives about the importance of reproductive rights. I was so nervous! Those nerves were only controlled due to my passion. I was finally speaking to lawmakers about the issues that had been plaguing my mind since high school. When I spoke to the lawmakers, I knew I was speaking not just for myself, but for the women whose voices had been silenced or ignored in political spaces. I was speaking for my sister, for the women who had been directly impacted by restrictive reproductive laws, for those who were denied access to proper healthcare, and for those who had to navigate a legal system that often failed to protect their basic rights. In this moment, I felt a sense of empowerment that I had never experienced before. It was a defining moment in my life that affirmed my dedication to advocacy and to fighting for women's rights. The experience also made me realize how important it was to be fearless in standing up for what you believe in, even when it feels daunting, scary, impossible or overwhelming.

After that experience, I continued to take advantage of the different opportunities I was given to speak out for my sister and for women, challenging the status quo, learning from the professors I was surrounded by, and making sure to soak up every word that was spoken to me. I

was encouraged to advocate against issues such as the lack of diversity in corporate America, wage discrimination, Women's Rights issues worldwide, and other discriminatory practices.

A key issue I became passionate about during my time at Spelman was the lack of diversity in corporate America. As a woman of color, I had witnessed firsthand the barriers to entry for people that look like me. Additionally, I was deeply invested in wage discrimination as I learned more about the gender pay gap. It was extremely frustrating to learn how women's labor was undervalued.

Importantly, my time at Spelman College taught me the importance of courage in the face of adversity. It taught me that speaking out for what you believe in, especially when the issues are difficult or uncomfortable, is an act of resistance and strength. I learned that advocacy is not always easy, but it is always necessary. And I learned that the fight for women's rights is a lifelong commitment.

Also, during my time at Spelman I studied the work of Audre Lorde. In Audre Lorde's essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", she calls attention to the exclusion of Black women in feminism and the need for diverse community. Here, Lorde highlights racism and homophobia within the feminist community by calling out the rejection of their experiences and presence.

Throughout the essay, Audre Lorde provides meaningful insight on American systems of oppression that harm Black women. She refers to this harm as an arrogance created in feminist theory caused by the exclusion of lesbian and Third World women consciousness. This is important because it explains how a patriarchal society leads women to overlook the experiences of women they do not identify with. To further this point, Lorde addresses how women are taught to "either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspension

rather than as forces for change” (Lorde 2). This is imperative to the essay because it emphasizes the danger of allowing our differences to divide us as feminists. And finally, the moment in the text that impacted me the most was Audre Lorde’s use of rhetorical questions to emphasize the issue of not having enough Black and Lesbian women present at the conference. These questions cause for pause from the reader and allow them to truly digest the ignorance of not including Black and Lesbian feminists. Even though this essay was written in 1984, it is still extremely relevant to today’s society as seen in my sister’s experience. Feminist culture still struggles with inclusion and recognizing the intersectionality of all women.

My life-experiences alongside my undergraduate studies in Economics and Women’s Studies propelled me to study law and gave me the power to participate in difficult dialogue, ask questions, and create a space for myself at all tables. These disciplines instilled in me a deep understanding of power structures, social inequities, and the role that law can play in understanding both perpetuating and challenging these systems. They equipped me with the tools to carve out space for myself in areas where traditionally marginalized voices might struggle to be heard.

My undergraduate experience reinforced my core teachings and reaffirmed my desire to attend law school. I developed a passion for social justice, particularly those concerning women’s rights, gender equity, and economic inequality. This passion grew as I witnessed firsthand how legal systems often fail to protect vulnerable populations.

Currently, as a law student at SMU, I aim to approach the law with an inclusive and unbiased mindset. As I understand it is important to engage in community conversations to evolve my thought process, I actively engage with my community and my peers. In my first year of law school, I joined two impactful clubs on campus “*If, When, how*” and “*Women in Law*”. Both these clubs focus on advancing women’s rights within the legal profession and creating a supportive

community for law students. These clubs have served as an essential environment for my personal and professional growth. They both have empowered me to center women's experiences and issues in legal discourse. Additionally, they have provided a safe space for me to explore the intersection of law, gender, and social justice with others who have differing backgrounds and opinions than myself.

*"If, When, how"* is a club that advocates for reproductive justice and personal autonomy. Through my involvement in this club as co-event chair, I have had the opportunity to host panel discussions about the barriers people face in the reproductive rights space. In this club, many of the stories shared are from non-marginalized women and attorneys. Through this I have been fortunate enough to hear powerful stories about their triumphs within the reproductive rights space. Their stories are impactful and important; however, the minority perspective was not highlighted as much. Through this, I understood that it is important to ensure diverse representation in all spaces. It is clear that the experiences of women from marginalized communities are not often at the forefront of these conversations. The gap in perspective emphasizes the need for advocacy and encouraged me to actively search for speakers from various backgrounds.

Similarly, *Women in Law* has curated space for me to connect with women within the legal profession. Through this organization I have had the opportunity to meet unique and diverse women who are passionate about the law. These interactions have allowed me to meet like-minded individuals.

Both spaces have been vital in reinforcing my commitment to women's rights and have allowed me to build upon my values. However, as Audre Lorde critiqued, feminist spaces often lack diversity instead focusing primarily on the voices of more privileged women. As someone who is classified under multiple identities that intersect with race, class, and gender, I am often the

minority in these spaces. This experience has encouraged me to bring a more inclusive and intersectional approach to the conversations. As a minority, I offer perspectives and ideas that challenge the status quo and assist in creating space for voices that are often overshadowed or ignored.

For example, there were several instances where I found myself being the only one advocating for more intersectional and diverse events that focuses on. feminist issues impacting minority groups. It often caused tension and debates because many of my peers do not recognize some of their implicit biases that are shown in their outlook on feminism. These moments have served as an opportunity for growth not only for me, but for members of the clubs. Through conflict, I learned how to navigate complex conversations with respect and a willingness to learn and listen.

By challenging the ideas and opinions of others along with being challenged my ability to advocate effectively has been strengthened. In addition, I have learned the importance of using my voice in spaces where my perspective may be the minority and to speak out and be heard. I also understand how important it is to approach such dialogues with patience and empathy. These moments are extremely helpful as they help diversify my thoughts and promote a more inclusive legal field. These interactions have given me the confidence to speak up when my voice is needed and have deepened my commitment to promoting equity in the legal profession.

My participation in these clubs has deepened my commitment to advocating for a legal field where inclusivity is a consistent reality, not just a month or day. The mentorship and guidance I have received from current lawyers has reinforced the importance of supporting one another in this difficult, male dominated field.

All and all, both *If, When, How* and *Women in Law* have not only served as supportive environments for my personal and academic development but have also acted as a safe-space where I have been challenged to expand my understanding of feminism and legal advocacy. These clubs have taught me that growth happens through dialogue and is often not possible without allowing yourself to be uncomfortable

Again, these clubs reinforced my core values. Growing up, I have always felt compelled to lead whether that be leading the class pledge in kindergarten, becoming freshman dorm class president or serving as a student ambassador at Spelman College. Through these experiences I learned that I consider myself an honest person, I believe in treating others as I want to be treated and that sincere relationships are based on respect and continuity, and I am offended when others are treated unfairly due to their race, physical ability or financial status. I take pride in getting to know people for who they are rather than their outward possessions or appearance. Over time, I have learned that despite setbacks, with hard work and persistence, goals can be achieved. I am a leader and known for considering all consequences before making decisions, respectfully disagreeing and presenting logical arguments for the choices I make.

To grow is to change and shift and that is not always comfortable or easy. Being complacent and a silent member would be easy, but change is created through advocacy and constructive confrontation. I have learned the key to growth is stepping out of my comfort zone, exchanging ideas, questioning assumptions, and the willingness to ask questions. These experiences have helped mold my approach to the law by helping me find and use my voice. As I continue my legal studies, I know that the conversations I have had in these spaces will stay with

me, guiding my approach to advocacy, legal practice, and my future work in creating a more equitable legal system.

As I matriculate through law school, I bring compassion, and analytical intelligence. These qualities allow me to advocate for those who are often overlooked or marginalized. Through difficult dialog, I strive to make the legal profession more inclusive and accessible for all people.

The ups and downs of life have shaped me into who I am today, and this next chapter is defined as one of a passion for justice, equity, and a belief in the power of dialogue. By engaging in the community here at SMU. participating in challenging discussions, and being part of various student organizations, I've learned the importance of spaces where diverse perspectives can be shared and heard, even when it is uncomfortable or intense. One of the most valuable lessons I've gained so far is the understanding that legal practice is not just about learning the law as it, but about shaping the law for the future and creating laws that reflect the diverse society we all live in.

The law school environment has challenged and pushed me further than I can imagine. The challenges have been extremely intense, but they have also been transformative. At the start of 1L, the classes, exams, and rigor of law school were overwhelming. Thus far, I have welcomed this challenge and have used my past experiences—positive and negative—as motivation. By engaging in community and participating in difficult dialogue I have reframed my thought process. I recognize that the law evolves as society's understanding of justice and inequity. As a future legal professional, I have a responsibility to advocate for a more inclusive legal system.

Thankfully, my sister is healing and has reclaimed her joy! Through her victory, I am committed and look forward to helping women, the marginalized and those less fortunate than I reclaim their joy as well. Watching her overcome challenges that seemed life-ending has



encouraged me to continue in my pursuit of a law degree. For so long, my sister struggled and the barriers she faced when attempting to get justice made it even more difficult for her mentally. With, support, faith, and love she has been able to rebuild. Her journey is a testament to the power of resilience and community.

Witnessing my sister's victory reaffirmed my commitment to helping others, serving my community, speaking out, and earning my juris doctorate. I am grateful for the Law School community as it has matured me, challenged me, and humbled me. Additionally, the law school experience has challenged me to learn about the broader systems of oppression that exist and to build upon the ideals learned at Spelman as I navigate a new environment. I understand that I have been gifted the opportunity to be surrounded by people who do not think like me or share my experience. It is a privilege to learn from those who do and do not think like me. As a student, I constantly have my thoughts challenged and challenge others thought process and opinions. My experiences in student organizations *like If, When, How* and *Women in Law* have shown me the importance of using the law as a tool for advocacy and change. Whether it is fighting for reproductive rights, challenging discriminatory policies, or advocating for marginalized communities, I have learned that the law is not a neutral entity. Rather the law requires discernment and a detailed application depending on circumstances. There is so much power in the legal field as it has the power to harm or help. As a future lawyer I must seek difficult dialogue to ensure I am as educated as possible.

Staying true to myself, as I look toward my future, I see myself as someone who will use the law to create spaces for healing and empowerment. Just as my sister has reclaimed her joy, I want to help others do the same. I want to be the lawyer who not only understands the law but also uses it to fight for those who have been ignored or oppressed by it. I want to advocate for people

who have been failed by systems that are supposed to protect them. As I continue to navigate the legal field, I aim to keep the morals that got me into law school at the forefront of everything I do. I would be honored to be receive the Ethics Essay Prize. Thank you for your time and consideration.

#### Works Cited

Lorde, A. (n.d.). *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house ...* Retrieved January 17, 2022, from [https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde\\_The\\_Masters\\_Tools.pdf](https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf)