



But I Cannot Win  
by  
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How devoted would Mother Theresa be to American Idol? Would Martin Luther King, Jr. prefer working on his golf game? If Mahatma Gandhi played video games would he keep it simple with *Tetris* or become a *Guitar Hero* champion? It is hard for me to even imagine these amazing leaders living a life of leisure, taking a night off, or just being “normal” people. They, in my mind, cannot be “normal” people because they are “leaders.” I mean, I look up to them as role models when I am not preoccupied with updating my “Pieces of Flair” on Facebook.

There seems to be a number of things going on here. I cannot even formulate a picture of historical social change agents goofing off, taking time off, watching reality television, or having hobbies. Where is the disconnect then? In the making of a hero, limitations, bias, mistakes, lack of judgment, or other “normal” characteristics get stripped away, forgotten, and de-humanized. I like to think about it like an air brushed photograph. Everything is perfect. I do not know about you, but I do not walk around with an airbrush artist, so all of my flaws, imperfections show up. I have had to work really hard to remember when I look at magazines that these images are not reality so as to not draw comparisons. Furthermore, it is imperative to allow myself the room to accept my “humanness” and search for the truth within my leadership role models when doing social justice work. This struggle, I believe, is part of a larger game that we play from birth to death. It is how we play the game that leads to social change. Let’s refer to the game of doing and talking about social justice and leadership as the social justice leadership game. This game is complicated with a little bit of Black Jack, Poker, reality television, and boxing, mixed with cards, chips, teamwork, and solo performances. Let’s take it one step at a time, start by reviewing the rules of the game and then we can look at the players and strategies.

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## Rules of the Game

To play the social justice leadership game, like Black Jack, there are certain cards that are secret and others that are visible and these cards represent individual identities and group memberships (e.g. race, sexuality, gender, age, ability, nationality, veteran status, socio-economic class, access to education, relationship status, size, etc.). The balance between the visible and invisible plays out either through personal identity or expression and the perceptions of others. This creates a space for judgment. For example, someone may identify as bi-racial and be perceived as a member of only one racial group or I may think my friend is as able-bodied as I am and not know that she is coping with bipolar disorder, or has a medical condition that limits her abilities. Based on what we make known to others (expression) and how they in turn judge us (perception), we exchange value, or privilege, with others.

The example I like to use to better understand how privilege works draws from Poker. The idea is that a big Poker game is in session, someone gets up and I take a seat at the table. I inherit the chips from the previous player. For the rest of the Poker game, I exchange chips with the other players based on what I think they have in their hands and vice versa. I could be bluffing, have a really great hand, or make a foolish mistake, as can my opponents. For the rest of the Poker game, I will be exchanging chips (privilege) with my opponents; I do not ever get to make more chips, buy or earn more, or invent new rules. In the social justice leadership game, I am literally banking on what the other players think I have in my hand. To make this point clear, let's take how smart we think someone else is. I have met lots of dumb people with lots of degrees as well as folks that seem to have so much to teach me with less education than I do. In this game, no matter how many degrees someone has, they have not earned intelligence privilege. Bill Gates had an idea in his garage and dropped out of college and benefits from intelligence privilege while George W.

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Bush graduated from Yale and has his intelligence often questioned publicly.

So, in addition to Black Jack and Poker, the social justice leadership game also has a little bit of reality television involved, in that the game pits different group membership collectives against each other making cross-collaboration difficult. This game depends heavily on groups and individuals identifying consistently with their own subordination. Community building occurs best within these perspectives by collectively measuring what the dominant group has. Women can talk about men, folks of color talk about whites, elders speak of youth, youth speak of adults, non-U.S. citizens speak of Americans, etc. Loyalties and alliances are formed based on these subordinated identities impairing authentic communication. Ideally, players would begin to claim their dominant identities so that heterosexuals advocated for queers, whites for folks of color, upper class individuals for those with less financial access, adults for the elderly and youth, etc., but rooting and rallying for the “under dog” may get you ousted from the game itself and negates the game’s emphasis on winning. So, you get people playing for their own best interest in a competitive, if not “better them than me” manner to take from other teams and possibly even other teammates. These same players may cheat, lie, steal, or ruthlessly look for ways to protect their perceived standing in the game. As frequently demonstrated on reality television shows, a contestant that is perceived as a threat will get ousted even if there is another player that is more likely to pose a challenge. Lastly, even though the players manipulate the rules of the game, the social justice leadership game’s structure relentlessly refuses to change or reveal itself completely to the players.

### **Players of the game: The System vs. Individuals on Teams**

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen. We have for you tonight an exciting battle between two of boxing’s greaestt. In the black shorts we have the reigning world champion, undefeated for

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centuries, systematic oppression vs. the foolish and optimistic underdog in red shorts, a Black Jack, Poker playing survivor of reality television.”

#### Systematic Oppression (black shorts)

Sure, you can apply a tag team type element, but it is important to recognize that ultimately, the “us vs. them” characteristic is the system vs. those in the system. This is why any oppression of anyone impacts everyone – the system oppresses everyone. To continue playing the social justice leadership game, each player has to keep this reality in mind. This includes all of our heroes, role models, idols, teammates, rivals, underdogs, favorites, allies, and adversaries.

As a player of the social justice game, the black shorts, systematic oppression, represents both the “how” and the “why” things are the way they are now. Historical perspectives, bias, victories, and losses have not shaken this player’s foundation. Systematic oppression owns the game, literally. It is my belief that this player will never submit or soften, or forfeit or send in a second string player. The boxer in the black shorts feels no pain, does not bleed or bruise, and assumes victory. The time has come, to focus on the opponent in the red shorts – to begin the journey of self-reflective observation.

#### Foolish and Optimistic Underdog (red shorts)

When I am conscience of playing the social justice leadership game, I find myself discouraged to keep playing as I lack the confidence that I can “win.” I ask myself, “Am I prepared?” “Will I be successful?” “Is there something that needs to be done first?” Between prioritizing my strategies, gathering resources, building alliances, listening to self-doubt, and giving myself pep talks, I find myself distracted and intimidated. Because it is hard to see progress in the game, I may decide to take a break, do laundry,

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hang out with my friends, get pedicures, watch silly movies, take a long walk alone; who knows what else I do when I am not paying attention. I could be playing other “sideline games” like *As My Universe Turns Day Time Drama*, or *Who’s Got It Worse*, *Silver Spoons and Other Spoilages*, with my close confidants, neighbors, or total strangers. These “sideline games” are part of the black short’s game plan. These distractions from the social justice leadership game keep my judgment skills, of self and others, sharp and my reflective observation skills focused on other people or situations.

When I decide to come back into the center of the ring, I have to navigate my identities, expressions, and perceptions of others. Feelings of guilt, shame, denial, and defensiveness also frequently bubble up to the surface, especially when I compare myself to deities of social justice from history and role models from my present. “I could never be as socially just as Gandhi. I mean, look at me, I am a horrible person.” “I cannot be perfect all the time.” “I cannot believe I drove my car down the block to pick up my laundry – from a laundry service.” “It is not that I do not recycle, it is just so much more difficult. The city needs to implement an easier way to pick up my recycling, then I will do it.” “Like you never laugh at jokes like that! Relax it is just a joke.” I may take a swing or two in between these blows, but the impact of the hits is cumulative. No matter my efforts and the amount of blood, sweat, and tears, the black shorts always lands another surprise punch.

If the game is centered on earning and doling out privilege points, I find myself easily judging other people and rallying around other members of the subordinated groups to which I belong. There is nothing more comfortable to me than being at a women’s pot luck brunch with other queer women where the conversations focus on patriarchy and heterosexism. We collectively foster our communal connection and rally against the dominant groups that oppress me and my fellow bruncher; to carry out my boxing metaphor; we compare scars, lick wounds, and exchange horror stories of pain,

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exhaustion, and devotion. If the conversation takes a turn between courses of organic finger sandwiches and tofu casseroles to my dominant group identities like whiteness, age, class, ability, citizenship, size, my friends and I may find ourselves sliding down a spiral of paralyzing emotions, like guilt, shame, denial, and defensiveness. This is all a part of the social justice leadership game's strategy – kick 'em while they are down and hit 'em hard when they get back up. I am less likely to keep playing; to keep up my conscious, objection self-reflecting on my own dominate group memberships with guilt or shame clouding my feelings and thoughts. Denial and defensiveness further impair my actions leaving me sluggish, if not incapable of standing or staying in the ring. Managing my identities, expressing myself as I wish, and objectively self-reflecting on how I perceive others is exhausting and uncomfortable. I am less likely to start something if I do not know that I will excel. This means that if I cannot be perfect, I do not start. Instead of entering the ring defeated, I do not show up or worse --I find myself in the center of the ring, surrounded by the press and blood thirsty spectators, in the fetal position covering my head to protect myself from further embarrassment or pain.

### **Strategies of change**

Strategies of change are different from strategies to win. If I constantly return to what is comfortable, then I will not challenge myself in new ways or learn. If I do not think that I already have the answers, I am less likely to accept a question. Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Tenacity is important when working for social justice, but needs to be paired with the room to grow, new information, mistakes, redirection, and accountability. Your strategy of play also needs to curtail judgment, complaining, intimidation, fear of making a mistake, peer pressure, and succumbing to such pressures. To make real change, I have to accept myself with what I have and where I am. I must also have a commitment to social justice for all people and

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not be on the look out for my own benefit. It is only through honest and objective self reflection -- being aware of my thoughts, feelings, and behavior patterns -- that I can begin to change the social justice leadership game. Instead of focusing on complete perfect success or the annihilation of my opponent through total dismantling of systematic oppression, I turn to myself. This tactic allows me to make mistakes and learn from them and challenge and develop my many identities, both subordinated and dominate. Probably the hardest element of this strategy is that progress - if not results - are almost impossible to measure.

This reminds of my first interaction with PETA. I remember at one point, in eighth grade, thinking that I would get a list of all of the companies that mistreat animals or use products from companies that use animal testing. I thought that I could get this list, keep it with me in my wallet and that I could easily refer to it until I memorized the list so that I could eliminate animal testing related products from my life. This would align with my political view that animal testing and cruelty to animals is wrong. This idea lasted about two weeks. The vast majority of the two week period was due to mailing off of the list and waiting for it to arrive in my mailbox (this was prior to the internet). Once the PETA packet arrived in my mailbox, I was immediately overwhelmed by the extensive research and fifty page double columned list of companies I so naively hoped to ban from my life. This list certainly would not fit in my wallet and if I had the concentration skills to memorize it, I probably would have done better on standardized vocabulary tests. So, what was I to do? If I did not succeed at eliminating these companies from my purchasing power outlets, did that mean that I supported animal cruelty? No! It meant that I needed to figure something else out. I re-wrote my game plan. To this day, twenty years later, I still cannot list off a dozen companies to avoid from the PETA list. I am also certain that animal testing and animal cruelty still exists. My new game plan involves telling people my views and the reasons behind them, increasing my knowledge about my favorite products and

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their policies concerning animal testing, choosing new products if I learn that there is something incongruent between my views on animal rights and preferred toothpaste flavor, and staying in touch with PETA to keep myself educated on animal rights. This is not enough to solve the larger problem and does not guarantee that my life is animal testing free. This is not perfect. I can say that I am doing my best to live in congruence with my political views most of the time. This is better than nothing.

Playing the social justice leadership game can often times be disappointing, discouraging, and draining. To rejuvenate, I typically get pedicures, watch movies, host a lesbian brunch, or other activities where I do not have to “pay attention” to myself or others. I usually call this “clocking out,” but it is important for me to recognize that this is all part of the social justice leadership game. There is a difference between “clocking out” and “checking out” because “clocking out” implies that I will be back. Moreover, when I “clock out,” someone else is “clocking in.” My opponent in the ring is banking of me “checking out” to never return and hopes that no one will step forward to take my place. Much like leaders before me, I am not alone in this battle. Before the referee can count to three, someone else “clocks in.” After a break, I get my bearings, and can tag myself back into the ring. If my teammates and I keep “clocking back in,” then the black shorts has to change strategies to win.

So, when the going gets tough... the game’s structure banks on my teammates and I turning on each other. Welcome to *Oppression Olympics* and the judgment line! *Oppression Olympics* is where an individual develops a hierarchy of pain via socially constructed privilege rankings. Group members pit themselves against each other based on personal identities and internalized bias. As stated earlier, when working with social justice issues, it is imperative to remember that oppression hurts everyone. With that said, it really is ingrained in our culture to determine who you get to beat and how you can take them down to get ahead. This strategy is

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reinforced by the very structure of the social justice leadership game. *Oppression Olympics* show up when we pit our pain against someone else's. Like when I have said that I have survived more of a struggle to get where I am because I am a lesbian raised on welfare. This is me showing up from my subordinated positions and disregarding the fact that everyone in my family has a post-graduate degree; I have white skin; I am healthy and wealthy, and legally married. Some "Olympians" may not even have a definitive team (e.g. transracial adoptees, bi/multi-racial identified people, gender queer individuals, first generation born children of undocumented immigrants) and may claim they are the most discriminated against. By developing adversaries, communication breaks down. Steve Biko, noted anti-apartheid activist in South Africa, stated that the strongest tool of oppression is the mind of the oppressed. What better way to control the minds of the oppressed than creating a structure where different divisions of the oppressed oppose each other, securing the oppressive structure in place. I am a firm believer that there is not a hierarchy of oppression when pain is the equalizer.

When not playing *Oppression Olympics*, most players of the social justice leadership game sit back comfortably on the judgment line. This is where we players point fingers, mock, and humiliate those "ranked" lower than we think we are ranked while complaining, whining, and resenting those above of us. It is easy for me to judge other "self-identified do-gooding white liberals" like me, when they do not recycle, drive gas guzzler vehicles, hold Starbucks coffee drinks, or make stock exchanges on their Bluetooth ear pieces on the way to yoga class. I can easily feel better than them. I can also be blinded by my own ranking on the judgment line. Like, when I say that I cannot be homophobic because I recycle, or that I am "a good white person" because I have friends that are people of color. When speaking at a college campus, I stated that I thought racism was alive and well in our culture. The Vice President of Student Affairs, raised his (not only was he male, but an affluent, well-educated, white, heterosexual

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male) hand, and emphatically disagreed with me and claimed that, “Racism is over. In fact, my son even invited a little black boy to his birthday party.” This blindness can be from inexperience, ignorance, ill applied standards, and physical impairments.

The judgment line also works by measuring others. I remember after my father died, judging my brother for having cable. Sure he was on welfare, working two jobs, married, with a child, but he had cable. Though I lived in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the United States, and traveled on vacation monthly, I determined that I was actually experiencing more financial hardship than he was – because he had cable. I can also judge myself by questioning my dedication to a movement when I no longer am willing to be arrested because I have 600 count Egyptian cotton sheets; how could I possibly call myself an activist? This measurement trap and judgment line is as realistic as judgments and assumptions we all make everyday. I am confident that this is more evidence of my humanness and I keep playing the social justice leadership game further aware of my limitations.

Even though none of these tactics will win the game, the players may feel like they are “doing something” and may even feel like they are “getting ahead” in the game. It is part of our culture to figure out where we fit in an ideal context instead of focusing on who we are in our own reality. *Oppression Olympics*, the judgment line, and other competitive strategies are innate parts of the social justice leadership game’s structure as is the impossible task of navigating ever developing and fluid identities of oneself and fellow teammates in an ever evolving game with a relentless opponent.

Lastly, regardless of which strategy a player employs, it is imperative to be realistic. Part of the game plan needs to include making mistakes, taking breaks, unexpected realizations, and self-reflection. At first, these distractions may seem like detours, but are just part of being authentic players of the social justice

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leadership game. The structure of the social justice leadership game distorts reality and mass produces it as history, collective memory, and other such urban legends. The lived experiences of social justice leaders, like Mother Theresa, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have been distorted in their life and after their death. Mother Theresa doubted her faith in God and questioned her hope for change. Gandhi battled lust, peer pressure, and jealousy on the path to truth. Perhaps King should have taken some time off from his stressful work, education, ministry, and public involvement. He took such little care of himself that upon his death, his autopsy results stated that he had the aged heart of a man 25 years older than his actual age. If these social justice leaders and historical change agents “clocked out,” got distracted or sidelined, made mistakes, had regrets, etc., then why can we, other game players, not take advantage of the same opportunities? I often remind myself, too, that if these folks and the thousands of others involved in social change movements did not solve social injustices, how and why do I put that kind of pressure on myself? Remember that pressure to be perfect, the need to measure my success, and the desire to see tangible results are not guaranteed in the social justice leadership game. I must constantly remind myself that the only element of the game that I have control over is my own role in the game itself.

Now that you may be able to see the humanness of social change agents as well as how much you have in common with them, this is the beginning of an authentic foundation for your own work. Your heroes, no matter who they are, navigate(d) the same social justice leadership game in order to make the changes that you respect. Allow them a degree of humanness; doing this will grant you permission to be realistic with yourself. Remember a few key things:

- No one, including yourself, is expected to be perfect
- Social Justice work is not about consistency but persistency
- You can only control yourself and no one or anything else

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- If your idols become ideals you cannot be realistic
- You are your best tool when playing the game
- Everyone is doing the best they can with what they have
- You are not alone and cannot play this game alone
- It is not the triumph, but the journey

So now what? Grab a pen and paper and prepare to do some objective self-reflection. Here are some guided questions, to help you re-group, choose teammates, and develop new strategies to stay in the game. Ask yourself if there are any patterns when answering the questions.

- Was it easier to list subordinated or dominant identities?
- How do you make sense of your invisible identities?
- When reviewing your dominant identities, where do you have the most access to power?
- How do you take advantage of your support networks and other realms of influences to implement your game plan of change?

I have answered them for myself to give you an example.

When you are done, ask yourself what individual and community support can you incorporate in your life from your dominant identities? This could be magazine subscriptions to formal organization membership or political activism. Remember it is from your dominant place that you have the most privilege and have the power to enact change.

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What are my subordinated group memberships? These would be the identities you have and those that are perceived about you by others that receive less privilege in particular socially constructed settings. Further clarify in your list below if this is a visible or invisible identity.

Subordinated Identities	Invisible	Visible
Lesbian/queer	X	
Non-Christian	X	
Physical Ability Issues		X
Woman Identified		X

What are my dominant group memberships? These would be the identities you have and those that are perceived about you by others that receive more privilege in particular socially constructed settings. Further clarify in your list, if this is a visible or invisible identity.

Dominant Identities	Invisible	Visible
White		X
American citizen		X
Native English Speaker		X
Upper Middle Class		X
Legally Married	X	
33 Years old	X	X
Extrovert		X
Highly educated	X	X

List the community organizations and other forms of support you have for your subordinated and dominant identities. Chances are you will have formal connections with your subordinated identities and possibly even a few that link different intersections of identities you have.

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Subordinated Identities	Dominant Identities
LGBT Community	Social Justice Colleagues
Trans Partner Community	SJTI.org
Social Justice Colleagues	White Privilege Conference
NGLTF, Campus Pride, NCTE	Television/Media
UTNE, Mother Jones	Friends and Chosen Family
Friends and Chosen Family	

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