

Letter from Dr. Cynthia Cohen to students of the independent study course of spring semester 2014, "Cultural Work and Social Transformation."

http://brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/pdfs/jsapp/Flyer_cultural-work-and-social-transformation.pdf

During the course, students learn about the cultural work and the 40 years of experience of Jane Wilburn Sapp, a distinguished African American musician, educator activist and cultural worker, in communities struggling for social justice. Students have the opportunity to reflect on Jane's work and its meaning in their own lives in writing and in an intimate, small group format. The students names are written as initials for their privacy.

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March 3, 2014

Dear L, K, M, J and S,

You have written about many different aspects of this group independent study, including the significance of the group itself and how we are working together, and the significance of meeting Jane Sapp, working with her, listening to her, and learning about cultural work. In both cases, your writings reflect on what we are doing, and also how the experiences with this project affect your inner lives – your sense of yourselves, your questions and feelings about identity, and your thoughts about your past, present and future.

After re-reading eight different reflections, I came to see that each of us is on a journey, and that our paths have converged through our work together on this project. It is our work together and our shared experiences that bring our evolving stories into relationship.

Several of you commented on our very first meeting together, especially the transformative effect of sharing stories with each other. M contrasted the first set of introductions, where we just shared basic information about ourselves including our current class year status and our majors, and the second, where we shared stories about people who have been teachers. By sharing stories, we became human beings to each other. To paraphrase her reflection just a bit:

*The second storysharing broke down the walls that separated us as students and connected us as human beings. It inspired me to be fully involved in the project; wanting to be part of a community of people who are passionate about social justice and who connect first as human beings, second as academics.*

Several of you commented on the significance of this opportunity to learn from our group process, from doing hands-on work, to taking on real responsibilities, and from being a diverse group of women who feel comfortable and safe with each other. I think it was K who pointed out that *how our work in the group mirrors Jane's thoughts about social change.*

One of the most significant parts of this experience so far has been meeting with Jane Sapp, of course. We have been able to talk with her informally, interview her, listen to her 'public' presentations (including both stories and songs). Several of you mentioned the moment in the MLK Jr. Day events when Jane began to sing. "*Her energy unites people so they can feel*

*the energy of the person standing next to them; her music does the same. Her music connects individuals so they become a community."*

Several of you noted how coming to know Jane has inspired you to think about yourselves more deeply. This has invited feelings of hope and sense of possibility, as well as feelings of pain. L movingly contrasted Jane's face with her own and how different they seem. *"I reflect on my time with Jane so far and hope that someday I can look more like her, not in my appearance, but in my heart, and in my actions."* M wrote: *I want to be able to understand the possibilities of my own influence from how she influences individuals in a community.*

J wrote very openly about the effects of Jane's work on her own (J's) connection to her culture. *Jane's work makes me feel connected to my own culture. Feeling less than on campus; opening up to how beautiful I am, just because of who I am (my culture, my history, my family, my soul); feeling connected to ancestors – powerful, but also painful...*

As J read aloud to us in our group meeting when Jane was with us:

*I have noticed that when I encounter something so beautiful, it makes me uncover another unbelievable awesome layer of myself that I never thought was there. My entire life I've always felt like nobody special, if not lesser than.*

*The saddest thing is to truly realize how sad you were, have been, up until this point living your life. As a second generation American, the culture that I was raised in taught me that my most important role is being a woman who is happy to serve and be open to others, to keep the family together. I was raised with a 'we' family. We actually do things for each other based off of the knowledge that our lives are interdependent. When people you love keep getting fired, going to jail, and dying, you start to notice you need some help to make it.*

*Jane's work, which opens up a feeling of self-awareness within me and meeting how beautiful my soul is, is painful. When I reach deep down, I look to see a face that has worn sorrow and despair for too long. Learning to accept myself is a beautiful process. Learning that I am more than my body, more than my words, more than other people's perceptions of who I am has been incredibly powerful. It has also been incredibly painful.*

J's experience here is very important for us to note. It reminds me of writing by K Berman, an artist working with young Black men recovering from the years of apartheid in South Africa. As they began to feel more safe and respected within Artist Proof Studio, more layers of pain were opened up, sometimes totally overwhelming them. There is something very paradoxical here: the more the work helps people feel appreciated, and good about themselves, the more it can open up painful memories. I think sometimes it is only from an improved condition that we can fully acknowledge the pain of earlier, more difficult positions. We need to keep that in mind when we work with communities.

In outline format, J also referred to a conversation she had with Jane, which I interpret to be about how it sometimes feels as a person of color working with white people. *Feelings of*

*being used because 'exotic' – is cool/validating to some white organizations – they see you as a stamp of approval for themselves. Gets exhausting, feelings of not being heard.*

This resonated strongly for me because I sometimes worry about this in my relationship with Jane. I don't worry so much about how this dynamic operates between us because for the most part we talk about these sorts of feelings whenever they come up. But there is still an awareness of what others project onto our collaboration, how I can appear as a white person building my career off of Jane's exceptional capacities and legacy, and how sometimes I wonder if people have doubts about whether I am trying to "get a stamp of approval" for myself by affiliating with Jane.

Having issues like this articulated is one of the great advantages of working as a multicultural, multi-racial research team.

You also mentioned learning about music itself – from witnessing and participating in Jane's performances and in the song-writing workshop, and from listening to Jane's presentation on spirituality and the quest for justice in the African-American musical tradition. We explored this on at least two levels: How we experienced the music ourselves, including the ways that it touched us deeply and built a sense of connection and community; and then how music in the Black Church reflected people's emotions, tying their religious beliefs to their yearning for freedom and how this energy was carried into the civil rights movement. About the song-writing workshop, M wrote that it was *therapeutic and empowering to share such vulnerable feelings and thoughts with complete strangers, and to be supported instead of mocked. When we came together as a group, we were able to create magic by entwining our stories into one with Jane's musical help. It was a great way to bond together towards the goal of inspiring ourselves towards social justice.*

Several of you also mentioned, of course, interest in understanding the elements of cultural work, the philosophy underlying it, and its relationship to other frameworks, especially development. You pointed out one clear principle of Jane's practice: focusing on what communities DO have, rather than what they don't have. K mentioned that Jane's empowerment of people seems related to sustainable development, and she wants to learn more about that. As a group, you want to hear more of Jane's stories, experiences and wisdom, and understand how her work has created, and can create, documentable positive impacts on people and communities.

Thank you, everyone!

Cindy

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Read more about a major project that Cindy is working on with Jane to document Sapp's 40 years of cultural work called "A Way Out of No Way: Jane Sapp, Cultural Work and Social Transformation."

The project aims to produce a book, a multimedia disc, a songbook and related performance/presentations: <http://brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/jsapp/index.html>