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Teaching Critical Thinking

Practical Wisdom

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Teaching 1

Critical Thinking

On the cover of my memoir *Bone Black* there is a snapshot of me taken when I was three or four. I am holding a toy made in vacation Bible school, a book shaped like a dove. I often joke that this picture could be called "a portrait of the intellectual as a young girl"—my version of *The Thinker*. The girl in the snapshot is looking intensely at the object in her hands; her brow a study in intense concentration. Staring at this picture, I can see her thinking. I can see her mind at work.

Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works. Children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers. Across the boundaries of race, class, gender, and circumstance, children come into the world of wonder and language consumed with a desire for

knowledge. Sometimes they are so eager for knowledge that they become relentless interrogators—demanding to know the who, what, when, where, and why of life. Searching for answers, they learn almost instinctively how to think.

Sadly, children's passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only. Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous. Sadly, these children stop enjoying the process of thinking and start fearing the thinking mind. Whether in homes with parents who teach via a model of discipline and punish that it is better to choose obedience over self-awareness and self-determination, or in schools where independent thinking is not acceptable behavior, most children in our nation learn to suppress the memory of thinking as a passionate, pleasurable activity.

By the time most students enter college classrooms, they have come to dread thinking. Those students who do not dread thinking often come to classes assuming that thinking will not be necessary, that all they will need to do is consume information and regurgitate it at the appropriate moments. In traditional higher education settings, students find themselves yet again in a world where independent thinking is not encouraged. Fortunately, there are some classrooms in which individual professors aim to educate as the practice of freedom. In these settings, thinking, and most especially critical thinking, is what matters.

Students do not become critical thinkers overnight. First, they must learn to embrace the joy and power of thinking itself. Engaged pedagogy is a teaching strategy that aims to restore students' will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized. The central focus of engaged pedagogy is to enable students to think critically. In his essay "Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?" Daniel Willingham says critical thinking consists

> of seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms young ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth.

In simpler terms, critical thinking involves first discovering the who, what, when, where, and how of things—finding the answers to those eternal questions of the inquisitive child—and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most. Educator Dennis Rader, author of *Teaching Redefined*, considers the capacity to determine "what is significant" central to the process of critical thinking. In their book *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools*, Richard Paul and Linda Elder define critical thinking as "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it." They further define critical thinking as "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self corrective." Thinking about thinking, or mindful thinking about ideas, is a necessary component of critical thinking. Paul and Elder remind us:

> Critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions and point of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well as to their speaking and listening.

Critical thinking is an interactive process, one that demands participation on the part of teacher and students alike.

All of these definitions encompass the understanding that critical thinking requires discernment. It is a way of approaching ideas that aims to understand core, underlying truths, not simply that superficial truth that may be most obviously visible. One of the reasons deconstruction became such a rage in academic circles is that it urged people to think long, hard, and

critically; to unpack; to move beneath the surface; to work for knowledge. While many critical thinkers may find intellectual or academic fulfillment doing this work, that does not mean that students have universally and unequivocally embraced learning to think critically.

In fact, most students resist the critical thinking process; they are more comfortable with learning that allows them to remain passive. Critical thinking requires all participants in the classroom process to be engaged. Professors who work diligently to teach critical thinking often become discouraged when students resist. Yet when the student does learn the skill of critical thinking (and it is usually the few and not the many who do learn) it is a truly rewarding experience for both parties. When I teach students to be critical thinkers, I hope to share by my example the pleasure of working with ideas, of thinking as an action.

Keeping an open mind is an essential requirement of critical thinking. I often talk about radical openness because it became clear to me, after years in academic settings, that it was far too easy to become attached to and protective of one's viewpoint, and to rule out other perspectives. So much academic training encourages teachers to assume that they must be "right" at all times. Instead, I propose that teachers must be open at all times, and we must be willing to acknowledge what we do not know. A radical commitment to openness maintains the integrity of the critical thinking process and its central role in education. This commitment requires much courage and imagination. In *From Critical Thinking to Argument* authors Sylvan Barnet and Hugo Bedau emphasize that, "Critical thinking requires us to use our imagination, seeing things from perspectives other than our own and envisioning the likely consequences of our position." Therefore, critical thinking does not simply place demands on students, it also requires teachers to show by example that learning in action means that not all of us can be right all the time, and that the shape of knowledge is constantly changing.

The most exciting aspect of critical thinking in the classroom is that it calls for initiative from everyone, actively inviting all students to think passionately and to share ideas in a passionate, open manner. When everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful. In such a community of learning there is no failure. Everyone is participating and sharing whatever resource is needed at a given moment in time to ensure that we leave the classroom knowing that critical thinking empowers us.

Teaching 2

Democratic Education

Growing up in the fifties when schools were still racially segregated and the seeds of civil rights struggle were being spread quietly, folks talked about the meaning and value of democracy. It was both a public discourse and a private topic of conversation. Black men like my father who had fought in the all-black infantry during the second world war came home disillusioned by a nation that had sent them to fight and die to "keep the world safe for democracy" while denying them civil rights. This disillusionment did not lead them to despair. It served as the catalyst for them to struggle on the home front to make our nation truly democratic. Throughout my high school years, I participated in the Voice of Democracy essay contests put on as part of their scholarship programs. In my essays, I would passionately express my views that our country was a great nation, the greatest nation in the world, because the United States was committed to democracy. I wrote that all citizens needed to assume responsibility for protecting and maintaining democracy.

Like many black children, I had been taught that one of the most important aspects of our democracy was that it granted the right of education to everyone irrespective of race, gender, or class.

There is little public discourse among students today about the nature of democracy. Nowadays, most students simply assume that living in a democratic society is their birthright; they do not believe they must work to maintain democracy. They may not even associate democracy with the ideal of equality. In their minds, the enemies of democracy are always and only some foreign "other" waiting to attack and destroy democratic life. They do not read the American thinkers, past and present, who teach us the meaning of democracy. They do not read John Dewey. They do not know his powerful declaration that "democracy has to be born anew in each generation, and education is its midwife." Highlighting the need to align schooling with democratic values, James Beane and Michael Apple paraphrase John Dewey in their book *Democratic Schools* to explain, "If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led." When disenfranchised groups of American citizens worked to change all educational institutions so that everyone would have equal access—black people/people of color and white females, along with allies in struggle—there was a dynamic national discourse about democratic values. In keeping with that discourse, educators were deemed crucial conveyers of democratic ideals. At the core of these ideals was a profound, ongoing commitment to social justice.

Many of those allies in struggle were white males who, by virtue of circumstance and privilege, had been at the forefront of efforts to make education a site where democratic ideals would always be realized. Yet, many of these proponents of democratic values were divided. In theory, they expressed the belief that everyone should have the right to learn and yet, in their practice, they helped maintain hierarchies within educational institutions

wherein privileged groups were given advantage. Like Thomas Jefferson, who contributed much to the rise of democracy, their minds were divided. Although he could proclaim "educate and inform the mass of people," in much of his work Jefferson's split mind was revealed. On one hand he could speak and write eloquently about the need to uphold the spirit of democracy and of equality, and on the other hand he could own slaves and deny black people basic human rights. Despite these contradictions, Jefferson did not waver in his belief that embracing change was crucial to the "progress of the human mind." He wrote, "As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times." Certainly, as the critique of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal values gained momentum, schooling and education began to undergo profound and radical changes.

Conservative dominator culture responded to these changes by attacking public policies like affirmative action that had provided the means by which institutions of higher learning could include disenfranchised groups. Consequently, the doors to education that had opened and allowed the disenfranchised to enter were closing. The subsequent rise of private schools undermined public schools, while teaching for testing reinforced discrimination and exclusion, and segregation on the basis of race and class has quickly become an accepted norm. On all fronts, funding for education has been cut. Progressive professors who had once pushed for radical change were simply bought off. High status and high salaries motivated them to join the very system they had once worked so hard to dismantle.

By the 1990s, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and Cultural Studies were all revamped so that they were no longer progressive locations within educational systems from which a public discourse about freedom and democracy could be vocalized. They were, for the most part, deradicalized. And in those loca-

tions where deradicalization did not take place, they were ghettoized, deemed a suitable playground for students who wanted to assume a radical persona. Today, professors who refuse to comply with deradicalization are often marginalized or even encouraged to leave academia. Those of us who stay, who continue to work to educate for the practice of freedom, see firsthand the ways that democratic education is being undermined as the interests of big business and corporate capitalism encourage students to see education solely as a means to achieve material success. Such thinking makes acquiring information more important than gaining knowledge or learning how to think critically.

The principle of equality, which is at the core of democratic values, has very little meaning in a world in which a global oligarchy is taking over. Using the threat of terrorist attack to convince citizens that free speech and protest place our nation at risk, governments globally are integrating fascist policies that undermine democracy on all fronts. Explaining that "capitalism no longer needs democracy" in his powerful polemic *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth*, Herve Kempf contends:

> Thus, democracy has become antithetical to the objectives the oligarchy seeks: democracy favors opposition to unwarranted privileges; it feeds doubts about illegitimate powers; it pushes for the rational examination of decisions. It is consequently more dangerous all the time during a period when the harmful tendencies of capitalism are becoming more obvious.

Now more than ever before in our nation, we need educators to make schools places where the conditions for democratic consciousness can be established and flourish.

Educational systems have been the primary place in our nation where free speech, dissent, and pluralistic opinions are valued in theory and practice. In her thoughtful consideration

of this subject, *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy: On Being an American Citizen*, Susan Griffin reminds us that "to keep the spirit of democracy alive requires a continual revolution." In her profound meditation on democracy, *The Healing of America*, Marianne Williamson emphasizes ways that the democratic principle of unity in diversity remains the foundation of democratic values:

> There are people in America who overemphasize our unity yet fail to appreciate the importance of our diversity, just as there are those who emphasize our diversity yet fail to appreciate the importance of our unity. It is imperative that we honor both. It is our unity and our diversity that matter, and their relationship to each other reflects a philosophical and political truth outside of which we cannot thrive.

Griffin echoes these sentiments: "In a democracy many different points of view about every possible subject will be expressed, and almost all of them must be tolerated. This is one reason why democratic societies are usually pluralistic." The future of democratic education will be determined by the extent to which democratic values can triumph over the spirit of oligarchy that seeks to silence diverse voices, prohibit free speech, and deny citizens access to education.

Progressive educators continue to honor education as the practice of freedom because we understand that democracy thrives in an environment where learning is valued, where the ability to think is the mark of responsible citizenship, where free speech and the will to dissent is accepted and encouraged. Griffin contends that,

> those who would contribute to democratic consciousness would transgress the boundaries of prejudice and assumption is consistent with the deep desire for free

> speech and thought, not just as tools in the eternal battles for political power that occur in every era but from an even more fundamental democratic impulse, the desire to enlarge consciousness.

Democratic education is based on the assumption that democracy works, that it is the foundation of all genuine teaching and learning.

Teaching 3

Engaged Pedagogy

Engaged pedagogy begins with the assumption that we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between student and teacher. As leaders and facilitators, teachers must discover what the students know and what they need to know. This discovery happens only if teachers are willing to engage students beyond a surface level. As teachers, we can create a climate for optimal learning if we understand the level of emotional awareness and emotional intelligence in the classroom. That means we need to take time to assess who we are teaching. When I first began work in the classroom, like many teachers I was most concerned, if not a bit obsessed, with whether or not a substantive amount of information and assigned material was covered. To make sure we had time in the classroom to cover the material that I believed really mattered, I did not take the time to ask students to introduce themselves or to share a bit of information about where they were coming from and what their hopes

and dreams might be. I noticed, though, that when I did make time for everyone to get acquainted, the classroom energy was more positive and more conducive to learning.

Knowing all that I know now after more than thirty years in classrooms, I do not begin to teach in any setting without first laying the foundation for building community in the classroom. To do this it is essential that teacher and students take time to get to know one another. That process can begin by simply hearing each person's voice as they state their name. When I first encountered Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh I was awed by his insistence that when a student is in the presence of a powerful, insightful teacher much can be learned even before words are spoken. He explains: "The Chinese say, 'When a sage is born, the water in the river and in the plants and trees on the mountains nearby became clearer and more green.'" Even though Thay (Nhat Hanh) is speaking about a spiritual teacher, those of us who have been in classrooms with incredible professors know that their presence illuminates.

When we see the classroom as a place where teacher and students can share their "inner light" then we have a way to glimpse who we are and how we might learn together. I like to engage the minds and hearts of students by doing simple writing exercises, sentence completions. We might all write a spontaneous paragraph beginning with a phrase like "my most courageous moment happened when...." Or we might bring a small object to class and all write a short paragraph about its value and importance. Reading these short paragraphs aloud to one another, we have the opportunity to see and hear each unique voice. Most professors know what it is like to sit in a classroom of twenty or more students, where you wish for scintillating dialogue and only the same two or three students talk. Writing and reading paragraphs together acknowledges the power of each student's voice and creates the space for everyone to speak when they have meaningful comments to make.

I never ask students to do an in class writing assignment that I

am not willing to do. My willingness to share, to put my thoughts and ideas out there, attests to the importance of putting thoughts out there, of moving past fear or shame. When we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community. We discover together that we can be vulnerable in the space of shared learning, that we can take risks. Engaged pedagogy emphasizes mutual participation because it is the movement of ideas, exchanged by everyone, that forges a meaningful working relationship between everyone in the classroom. This process helps establish the integrity of the teacher, while simultaneously encouraging students to work with integrity.

The root meaning of the word "integrity" is wholeness. Hence, engaged pedagogy makes the classroom a place where wholeness is welcomed and students can be honest, even radically open. They can name their fears, voice their resistance to thinking, speak out, and they can also fully celebrate the moments where everything clicks and collective learning is taking place. Whenever genuine learning is happening the conditions for self-actualization are in place, even when that is not a goal of our teaching process. Because engaged pedagogy highlights the importance of independent thinking and each student finding his or her unique voice, this recognition is usually empowering for students. This is especially important for students who otherwise may not have felt that they were "worthy," that they had anything of value to contribute.

Engaged pedagogy assumes that every student has a valuable contribution to make to the learning process. However, it does not assume that all voices should be heard all the time or that all voices should occupy the same amount of time. Early on in my graduate career and in the first years of teaching, I had been a student in classes where teachers were almost obsessively concerned with "fairness." To them, this meant that every student should be given the same amount of time to speak and that every voice should have equal substantive weight. Often, this led to circumstances where students who were not prepared would

talk on and on. In the engaged classroom students learn the value of speaking and of dialogue, and they also learn to speak when they have something meaningful to contribute. Understanding that every student has a valuable contribution to offer to a learning community means that we honor all capabilities, not solely the ability to speak. Students who excel in active listening also contribute much to the formation of community. This is also true of students who may not speak often but when they speak (sometimes only when reading required writing) the significance of what they have to say far exceeds those of other students who may always openly discuss ideas. And of course there are times when an active silence, one that includes pausing to think before one speaks, adds much to classroom dynamics.

When students are fully engaged, professors no longer assume the sole leadership role in the classroom. Instead, the classroom functions more like a cooperative where everyone contributes to make sure all resources are being used, to ensure the optimal learning well-being of everyone. Ultimately, all professors want students to learn, and to see education as a means of self-development and self-actualization. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom,* I state: "To educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way everyone thinks about pedagogical process. This is especially true for students." Engaged pedagogy is vital to any rethinking of education because it holds the promise of full participation on the part of students. Engaged pedagogy establishes a mutual relationship between teacher and students that nurtures the growth of both parties, creating an atmosphere of trust and commitment that is always present when genuine learning happens. Expanding both heart and mind, engaged pedagogy makes us better learners because it asks us to embrace and explore the practice of knowing together, to see intelligence as a resource that can strengthen our common good.

Teaching 4

Decolonization

Critical pedagogy encompasses all the areas of study that aim to redress biases that have informed ways of teaching and knowing in our society ever since the first public school opened. The two great movements for social justice in our nation that both changed all aspects of our culture and created small but powerful revolutions in education are the civil rights and feminist movements. After the militant push for racial equality led to desegregation and the changing of laws, black power activists were one of the first groups in this nation to call attention to all the myriad ways education was structured to reinforce white supremacy, teaching white children ideologies of dominance and black children ideologies of subordination. For example, they critiqued school children being taught that "Columbus discovered America" (a bias that denied the presence of indigenous native people in this nation before colonizing whites came to the so-called new world), and they exposed the knowledge that

African explorers had traveled to this soil before Europeans. Few people in our nation of any race want to remember the way in which black power activists worked in public schools both to see that children who were hungry would be fed and to offer them what Malcolm X called "new ways of seeing" themselves and the world.

Concurrently, feminist challenges to patriarchy and its concomitant insistence on the primacy of male thinkers and their works was an insurrection that created major changes. When a critique of race and class was added to that of gender, every bias was interrogated. To progressive teachers and students this was truly a revolution, making it possible for many of us to enter areas of study that were previously seen as arenas available solely to privileged white males. Many of us attended colleges and universities that would not have enrolled us had there not been both movements for equality aimed at redressing race, sex, and class biases and a movement for reparations and reconstruction (misnamed as "affirmative action"). It was as though the use of the word "affirmative" deemed that a big "yes" was being bestowed on the underprivileged by the privileged, hence it reinscribed the very structure of paternalistic domination that it was meant to redress. That aside, it did make it possible for many people from exploited, oppressed, and/or disenfranchised classes to seek higher education just at a historical moment where imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy was being questioned on an international front and here at home.

Drawing from the radicalism of militant freedom fighters from Africa, South America, China, and all over the world, radicalized Americans, especially those from disenfranchised groups, were learning a new language with which to articulate our place in the United States. Albert Memmi explored the relationship between the "colonizer and the colonized" and Frantz Fanon looked toward decolonization. Walter Rodney showed us "how Europe underdeveloped Africa." Léopold

Sédar Senghor gave us "negritude" and Amílcar Cabral spoke of the "decolonizing of mentality." Everyone was reading Marx. Some folks were working to put together race, gender, and class so that we could truly examine our world from an understanding of the way that difference articulated itself politically in our daily lives.

"Liberation" was a term constantly evoked. And it was incredibly liberating to learn a more complex political language with which to name and understand the politics of our nation. It was incredibly liberating to move past notions of personal prejudices and hatreds to look at systems of domination and how they operated interdependently. The most essential lesson for everyone, irrespective of our race, class, or gender, was learning the role education played as a tool of colonization here in the United States. Of course critics of this term, especially when applied to the experience of African Americans, insisted that it was inappropriately used because we were not indigenous inhabitants of a country we owned, with a distinct language and culture. They refused to acknowledge the link between the political fate of black citizens of the United States and black folks on the African continent.

Significantly, progressive black folks here talked most about the colonization of the mind. That colonization began for Native peoples, for black, brown, and yellow people with the assumption that our history here began with the civilizing presence of the colonizer. In *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, Paulo Freire contends:

> The culture of the colonized was a reflection of their barbaric way of seeing the world. Culture belonged only to the colonizers. The alienating experience of colonial education was only counteracted for the colonized at those moments when, in an urge for independence, they rejected some of its aspects.

For many first-generation-to-attend-college black people/people of color, the seeds planted that led us to reject a colonizing mentality were sowed within us prior to entering institutions because we could not have been ready to receive the "gifts" of affirmative action had we not already learned to resist passive acceptance of the pressures of dominator values and perspectives on our identity. Usually we learned a measure of resistance to dominant culture within our homes. That spirit served us well in educational institutions where we faced an onslaught of biased dominator thinking.

Without a decolonizing mentality, smart students from disenfranchised backgrounds often find it difficult to succeed in the educational institutions of dominator culture. This holds true even for those students who have embraced the values of dominant culture. In fact, those students may be the least prepared for the barriers they face because they have so convinced themselves that they are different from other members of their group. A major flaw in all of our nation's powerful movements for social justice has been and remains the assumption that liberation will take place in one fell swoop. That has been detrimental to progress simply because once certain gains in the direction of equality were achieved, the struggle stopped. And, of course, that is dangerous when one is attempting to construct sub-cultures of self-determination within the framework of dominator culture. We would all have fared better in our struggles to end racism, sexism, and class exploitation if we had learned that liberation is an ongoing process. We are bombarded daily by a colonizing mentality (few of us manage to escape the received messages coming from every area of our lives), one that not only shapes consciousness and actions but also provides material rewards for submission and acquiescence that far exceed any material gains for resistance, so we must be constantly engaging new ways of thinking and being. We must be critically vigilant. This is no easy task when most people spend most of their days working within dominator culture.

Those of us who work in education have been particularly fortunate because, individually, we are able to work against reinforcing dominator culture and biases with little or no resistance. College professors have tremendous freedom in the classroom. Our major difficulty is sharing knowledge from an unbiased and/or decolonized standpoint with students who are so deeply mired in dominator culture that they are not open to learning new ways of thinking and knowing. Recently, I gave a lecture wherein a young white female student boldly stated during open discussion: "I am one of those evil capitalists you critique and I do not want to be changed by participation in your classroom or reading your books." After I called attention to the fact that the word "evil" was not used during my lecture or in any work referred to, I was able to share that in all the classes I teach I make it clear from the start that my intent is not to create clones of myself. Boldly, I affirmed: "My primary intent as a teacher is to create an open learning community where students are able to learn how to be critical thinkers able to understand and respond to the material we are studying together." I added that it has been my experience that as students become critical thinkers they often of their own free will change perspectives; only they know whether that is for the better.

Since there has not been a radical transformation of education at its roots, education as the practice of freedom is still a pedagogy accepted only by individuals who elect to concentrate their efforts in this direction. We deliberately choose to teach in ways that further the interest of democracy, of justice. Since the radical interventions in education that have helped end many discriminatory practices, thereby creating diverse contexts for unbiased learning, have been severely attacked by dominator culture their impact is diminished. Concurrently, many "radical" thinkers often speak radical theory and then engage in conventional practice sanctioned by dominator culture. Certainly, rewards received by the dominant educational hierarchy diminish efforts to resist and transform education. Understanding

that liberation is an ongoing process, we must pursue all opportunities to decolonize our minds and the minds of our students. Despite severe setbacks, there have been and will continue to be constructive radical shifts in the way we teach and learn as minds "stayed on freedom" teach to transgress and transform.

Teaching 11

Imagination

Teachers rarely talk about the role imagination plays in helping to create and sustain the engaged classroom. Since much of the work in a given course is the sharing of facts and information it is easy to discount the role of imagination. And yet what we cannot imagine cannot come into being. We need imagination to illuminate those spaces not covered by data, facts, and proven information. In Dennis Rader's unpublished manuscript *Learning Redefined* he argues that educators must shift their thinking about what constitutes learning, that it is vital for us to understand that cultivating the imagination depends on initiative. He calls attention to educators who remind us that facts are energized by the imagination. He quotes George David Miller who shares this insight in his work *Negotiating Toward Truth:*

> Educators who value imagination have little problem affirming creativity and dynamism. Imagination points

> us beyond routine and static possibilities. But more than throwing us toward such possibilities, imagination synthesizes. It connects those things that were previously disconnected. Syntheses are creative acts. They represent the creation or births of new pathways, new possibilities, new hopes, and new dreams.

And yet imagination receives so little attention.

Writer Toni Morrison made a visit to a school for gifted children and while she found them extremely technologically advanced (they knew everything about computers), she discovered in talking with them that they lacked imagination. Overall in our culture the hours spent gazing at the television set seems to stop creative processes. We live in a world where small children are encouraged to imagine, to draw, paint pictures, create imaginary friends, new identities, go wherever the mind takes them. Then, as the child begins to grow, imagination is seen as dangerous, a force that could possibly impede knowledge acquisition. The higher one goes up the ladder of learning, the more one is asked to forget about imagination (unless a creative path has been chosen, the study of art, filmmaking, etc.) and focus on the information that really matters. J. B. Priestley contends:

> Because most children are highly imaginative, it is supposed by some that to reach maturity we ought to leave imagination behind, like the habit of smearing our faces with chocolate. But an adult in whom imagination has withered is mentally lame and lopsided, in danger of turning into a zombie or a murderer.

In dominator culture the killing off of the imagination serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo.

Listening to students talk about the myriad ways that they

feel diminished when teachers refuse to acknowledge their presence or extend to them basic courtesy in the classroom, I am continually awed by our power as teachers to help or hurt our students, to bolster their spirits or break them. Movements for social justice (anti-racist, feminism, gay rights) all insisted on acknowledgment of the way in which the personal is political. In the ongoing critique of dominator culture, thinkers and/or activists dedicated to changing society so that everyone can have equal access to basic human rights called attention to the "colonization" of the mind and imagination. They emphasized the various ways individuals from oppressed and/or exploited groups had been socialized to be self-hating and as a consequence could not begin to grow and become responsible citizens without first undergoing a shift in consciousness. This shift usually required folks to learn how to think outside the box. To think outside the box we have to engage our imaginations in new and different ways.

Imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folks can and do use. In traumatic circumstances, it is imagination that can provide a survival lifeline. Children survive abuse often through imagining a world where they will find safety. Within white-supremacist culture, black folks began a "black is beautiful" movement to resist the continual onslaught of negative representations of blackness. Without the ability to imagine, people remain stuck, unable to move into a place of power and possibility. Although Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander do not use the word "imagination" often in their book, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life,* the expansive engaged pedagogies they describe can only happen when triggered by creative imagination. In their introduction "Launching the Journey" they claim:

> Our premise is that many of the circumstances that seem to block us in our daily lives may only appear to

> do so based on a framework of assumptions we carry with us. Draw a different frame around the same set of circumstances and new pathways come into view.... Revolutionary shifts in the operational structures of our world seem to call for new definitions of who we are and what we are here for.

Essentially they are talking about thinking outside the box.

Although Zander and Zander do not use the word "imagination" that often, they do testify that without pressing concerns for survival "a person stands in the great space of possibility in a posture of openness, with an unfettered imagination for what can be." When a teacher lets loose an unfettered imagination in the classroom, the space for transformative learning is expanded. We bring imagination into our work by thinking of new and different ways to engage the particular group of students we are teaching at a given moment in time. When I teach African American literature and give the students an assignment to go out into the world and read the poetry of Langston Hughes to strangers and then write about their impressions and responses, I am imagining that they will have a different experience reciting and/or reading a poem aloud and witnessing its impact on a listener than they would reading quietly to themselves in the safety of private rooms or libraries.

No matter the subject I am teaching, I always use the writing and reading of spontaneously written paragraphs to stir our collective imagination in the classroom. When we are free to let our minds roam it is far more likely that our imaginations will provide the creative energy that will lead us to new thought and more engaging ways of knowing.

Teaching 29

Moving Past Race and Gender

In these times of extreme anti-feminist backlash, of mounting fascism, and its concomitant support of war and all things that are like war, it is vital that we celebrate the strength of sustained feminist movement, of Women's Studies. Its very existence, its survival, its continued growth and development is a testament to the power of solidarity between progressive women and men, especially the solidarity of individual visionary black women who have had to work against the conservative history rooted in sexist biases that once were the absolute foundation of feminist education.

In the introduction to her book *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For,* Alice Walker shares this insight:

> It is the worst of times because it feels as though the very earth is being stolen from us...: the land and air poisoned, the water polluted, the animals disappeared, humans degraded and misguided. War is everywhere. It

> is the best of times because we have entered a period... of great clarity as to cause and effect. A blessing when we consider how much suffering human beings have endured, in previous millennia, without a clue to its cause.... Because we can now see into every crevice of the globe and because we are free to explore previously unexplored crevices in our own hearts and minds, it is inevitable that everything we have needed to comprehend in order to survive, everything we have needed to understand in the most basic of ways will be illuminated now.... We live in a time of global enlightenment. This alone should make us shout for joy.

As feminist educators we can shout for joy. And yet we must also arouse our collective will to continue freedom's struggle, to continue to use our intellect and our imaginations to forge new and liberatory ways of knowing, thinking, and being, to work for change. We must revitalize our critical consciousness, to rekindle the seeds of militant radicalism that are the roots of every Women's Studies and Feminist Studies program and Women's Research Center in our nation. To do that, we must dare to make feminist meetings both times to celebrate and times to expand our consciousness. Let us honor the insight of Audre Lorde who once asked all of us, in all our diversity and differences of race, class, nationality, religion, sexual practice, to "re-member what is dark and ancient and divine within ourselves that it may aid our speaking, our dreaming, our way of life."

When we speak of the ancient dark divine the intent is not to re-inscribe some folksy image of the all-knowing strong black female. Our intent is not re-mammification or the evocation of any racialized sexist thinking that would render exotic the bodies and beings of black women by suggesting that we are innately more in tune with the earth, more soulful, more nurturing, more caring, more ethical than other groups of women or that we represent a feminine alternative to patriarchy. Patriarchy has no gender.

When we speak radically of the dark divine, the invitation is for each and every one of us to transcend race and gender, to move beyond categories, and into the interior spaces of our psyches to encounter there the ground of our being, the place of mystery, creativity, and possibility. For it is there that we can construct the mind that can resist, that can re-vision, that can create the maps that when followed will liberate us. To embrace the ancient dark divine is to engage the political and the spiritual; engaging the dark divine, we are all called to empathic identification with black females globally. We are called to see clearly that the fate of black females in the world is the mirror into which everyone can look and see all our destinies unfolding.

During the early stages of contemporary feminist movement it was common to talk about black women as experiencing double jeopardy because we were likely to be victimized by both sexism and racism. Then, as the movement progressed, class was added to this equation and a discussion of triple jeopardy ensued. In actuality, black females are assailed on all sides, on so many fronts that words like "double" or "triple jeopardy" are simply inadequate descriptions. We face exploitation and/or oppression. We face dehumanization from so many locations that the feminist strategies for our continued survival envisioned so far are nowhere near as complex and as clearly defined as they must be if we are to thrive.

For black females globally and here in our nation, these are dangerous times. To create lives of optimal well-being and, most fundamentally, just to survive, we require a feminist theory and practice that not only raises consciousness but offers new and different ways to think and be, activist strategies that can only be radical and/or revolutionary because there is no place in the existing structure of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy where we are truly safe, individually or collectively. When we come together to celebrate, for some of us, those of us who were engaged with Women's Centers from the inception find that our shouts of joy also must make way for moments of mourning, of ritual remembrance.

For in this unsafe world, we have witnessed untimely loss, the deaths of so many powerful black female voices, writers, thinkers, activists, artists, and visionary feminists. And for some of us, colleges and universities were the place where we first gathered, met one another face to face, and made our voices heard, experienced our first taste of a solidarity so sweet, so soul-nurturing that we were, indeed, literally carried away, ecstatically transported by the power of silences broken, by the sound of our decolonized speech. This is what Audre Lorde describes in conversation with Adrienne Rich when she declares: "What understanding begins to do is to make knowledge available for use, and that's the urgency, that's the push, that's the drive." In those heady days we were learning how to do just that. We needed the Women's Center and Women's Studies then, and we need them now. Much vital feminist theory/black feminist theory emerged in conversations and debates in these locations.

In the early days of the feminist movement, Toni Cade Bambara was with us, a leftist, social commentator, writer, leader of a black feminist vanguard, and lover of blackness. It was her voice that told us in the anthology *The Black Woman* that we needed to:

> set up a comparative study of the woman's role...in all the third world nations; to examine the public school and blueprint some viable alternatives; to explore ourselves and set the record straight on the matriarch and the Evil Black Bitch; to delve into history and pay tribute to all [black female] warriors...; to outline work that has been done and remains to be done in the area of consumer education and cooperative economics;[and] that we needed to get into the whole area of sensuality and sex.

These are just some of the insights we must remember and use.

Wisely, Bambara was telling us that we would need to move beyond simplistic categories like masculine and feminine because, as she explains,

> I have always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what...revolution for self is all about—the whole person...that the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles is an obstacle to political consciousness...that a revolutionary must be capable, of above all, total self-autonomy.

Bambara writes these words in 1970 and yet audiences and other black women engaged in feminist theory and practice still ask me, "Are you black first or a woman?" We know that when we ask them what feminist thinkers do you read and study, the answer is almost always "none." This is why archives are important and why the continual study of our work is crucial. This is why it is important that work by visionary black thinkers be collected in archives, ones that are, first and foremost, accessible to those who are engaged in the process of decolonization.

We know how easily and how quickly our words are forgotten, our histories buried. We all know that students, even our Women's Studies students, often show no hint of recognition when we talk about the works of Pat Parker, Lorraine Hansberry, Barbara Christian, Endesha Mae Holland, June Jordan, Octavia Butler, and even Audre Lorde. We know that feminist thinker Michelle Wallace has theorized the nature and substance of our continued invisibility because she has lived with the fear of erasure. In *Invisibility Blues* she reminds us:

> I have come to see the difficulties black women writers encounter as structural and systemic.... Because black women are perceived as marginal to the production of knowledge, their judgment cannot be trusted.... As a consequence black women are not allowed (by themselves as well as by others) to make definitive statements about

> the character of power, agency, and resistance within and beyond the black community. If and when they persist in doing so, the discouragement is great.

Wallace's insight is yet another reminder of why it is important that our papers be gathered, respected, used. As we all know, there are a small number of individual black women writers who have managed to engage in the insurrection of subjugated knowledge in such a way that our work is read more broadly, studied in classrooms, and quoted in a variety of texts (I place my writing among this work). Yet this inclusion does not ensure lasting presence, continued visibility, or sustained recognition.

On one hand, it is awesome that the critique of race and racism by women of color, many of us black women, brought to feminist movement fundamentally altered the nature of feminist theory. Yet we can still read celebrated theory by white women that builds on this work without any mention of the individual black women thinkers who laid the foundation. To resist this erasure, we must do all we can to document, to highlight, to study, to celebrate, and most importantly to create work that is cutting-edge, that breaks through silences and the different walls that have been erected to block our vision, of ourselves and of our futures.

Ironically, as more work by black women has received attention, much of that work has become more conservative, reformist, and not radical. We get gender without feminism. We are offered womanism as though it is the antidote to a powerful poison, that dangerous substance being feminism. When we connect Wallace's writing on invisibility with the constant demand Lorde makes in her work that silences be broken, then we claim our power to make ourselves visible because we have both a theory that enables us to understand what hems us in and a theory that conceptualizes our power to set ourselves and our words free. Lorde challenges us to not be trapped by fear. In *The Transformation of Silence* she declares:

> We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that finial luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us... there are many silences to be broken.

At times we want to be silent about how grave our circumstances are. We do not want to speak about how difficult it has become for black females of all classes to garner support in all areas of our lives. We want to be silent about how hard it is to raise consciousness, to critique, challenge, and change sexism, within and beyond black communities (particularly when the forms of black community that once placed us in meaningful solidarity with progressive black men are eroding daily). All black females, irrespective of class positionality, know how difficult it is to constructively change our lives so that we can have the necessary health and well-being to fuel revolutionary visions of social change.

Significantly, Toni Bambara, Audre Lorde, and June Jordan were all critical thinkers who dared to be militant, to speak when silence would have afforded them greater comfort. They all wrote about the need for black females to claim the space of becoming whole. Speaking openly of her commitment to feminist movement in the essay "Where Is the Love," Jordan testifies:

> I am a feminist, and what that means to me is much the same as the meaning of the fact that I am Black: it means that I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect. It means that I must everlastingly seek to cleanse myself of the hatred and contempt that surrounds and permeates my identity.... It means that the achievement of self-love and self-respect will require inordinate, hourly

> vigilance, and that I am entering my soul into a struggle that will most certainly transform the experience of all the peoples of the earth, as no other movement can, in fact hope to claim: because the movement into self-love, self-respect, and self-determination is the movement now galvanizing the true, the unarguable majority of human beings everywhere.

It is essential to our struggle for self-determination that we speak of love, as love is the necessary foundation enabling us to survive the wars, the hardships, and the sickness and the dying with our spirits intact. It is love that allows us to survive whole.

When I began to write books on love for a more popular audience, I would often hear from readers that I was no longer as radical, as militant as I appeared to them to have been. To those who would limit and define black female intellect, imprison us in academies where our teaching cannot reach the masses of people who are seeking life-changing theory and practice, love has no meaning. Hence they will not understand that it is the most militant, most radical intervention anyone can make to not only speak of love, but to engage the practice of love. For love as the foundation of all social movements for self-determination is the only way we create a world that domination and dominator thinking cannot destroy. Anytime we do the work of love we are doing the work of ending domination.

We, black females globally, have a long history of struggling through brokenness, of enduring great pain, and yet holding on. This is still the history of victimhood. The history that visionary radical black women are making in our lives and in our work, here today, is not a history that begins with brokenness. It is a history that begins with the recognition that the work of love is our revolutionary starting point, that to love ourselves no matter our circumstance is already to stand in the place of victory.

Teaching 31

Teaching as Prophetic Vocation

The more I teach, the more I learn that teaching is a prophetic vocation. It demands of us allegiance to integrity of vision and belief in the face of those who would either seek to silence, censor, or discredit our words. In Jim Wallis's book *The Soul of Politics* he maintains that the prophetic vocations require us to be "bold in telling the truth and ready to uphold an alternative vision—one that enables people to imagine new possibilities." The prophetic dimension of teaching is the least recognized in our nation.

Usually when I am asked what I do by shopkeepers, taxi drivers, bank tellers, or random folks standing in a line, I tell them I am an English teacher. To almost everyone, the English teacher matters. They are the teachers students most often remember, whether the memories are good or bad. And as adults no longer in school, when English teachers are mentioned, profound memories are evoked. It may be memories of how hard it was to

read or write. It may be the remembered embarrassment of having to read aloud in front of one's peers. It may be memories of red marks on paper, lines drawn through words, or exclamation points. Sometimes it is just the memory of the English teacher writing "Yes," and affirming that we were understood when we felt uncertain. Or the memories may be more profound. We may remember when we began learning critical consciousness for the first time. We may remember the moment when we first learned to be existentially self-reflective. Or it may be simply remembering the reading of that first book that reached inside, pulling our heart strings until we felt the story, and our being was utterly transformed.

My favorite high school English teacher is long dead. Yet what I hold in my heart's memory about her is that she, and her classes, challenged me. She challenged me to think, to be and become, to create. Growing up in the midst of racial apartheid, right at that moment when desegregation was changing all our lives, when we black children were sent out of our familiar neighborhoods into a strange dominating white world to be educated primarily by white teachers, many of whom regarded us with hatred and contempt, black students considered ourselves fortunate to be in a classroom with a teacher who loved justice, who believed we were all capable of excellence. In such a classroom, we had the opportunity to learn.

My favorite English teacher, white and middle-aged, was seen as a "nigger lover" because she repudiated the racism and white supremacy of the world around us, because she wanted her classroom to be a place where black students could learn with as much passion and zeal as white students. I regret that I cannot talk face to face with her and hear her story of how she came to be a teacher willing to educate as the practice of freedom in the face of apartheid, of racial ignorance and racist brutality. I remember her warmth, her daring, her will to challenge. I remember that she cared for black students, affirming our wholeness and the rightness of our being. And most importantly, she did not shame us.

Shaming is one of the most common strategies used by educators in classrooms where prejudices prevail. Shaming dehumanizes. In Michelle Paige's essay "Going Beyond the Book," published in the issue "All Together Now: Embracing Our Diversity" of the National Council of Teachers of English's journal *Voices from the Middle*, she shares this powerful insight:

> We, as teachers, are called upon to be advocates for our students, to empower our students to be productive citizens, and to take full advantage of their rights. Teachers often see firsthand the detrimental efforts of structural and society inequality on students —particularly students of color. One way we can be in relationship with students is to work on their behalf and to teach them how to work against injustice as well.

The most vital, the most liberating strategy, that beloved teachers offered me, especially the English teachers who taught me, was learning to be a critical thinker: to ask questions, to reserve judgment while putting together the who, what, when, where, why, and how. When I am asked to talk about how I became "bell hooks," renowned writer and intellectual, I talk about the significance of critical thinking and how it helped me survive the racist, sexist, class elitism outside the home of my growing up and the dysfunction which sanctioned abuse, betrayal, and abandonment within the patriarchal home.

When students ask me what I most want from them, I share with them that my intent is not to make them become "little bell hooks." They need not think as I do. My hope is that by learning to think critically they will be self-actualizing and self-determining. Just as I recall with tribute and praise the English teachers who encouraged me to be an active learner, to embrace radical openness, I hope my students will look back and remember that I taught them to look for what is significant, to develop their intellects by working with ideas.