

RESISTANCE AS AN ACT OF LOVE: REMEMBER YOUR ROOTS

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I am an educator who centers social justice in all of my work, and in order to do this work, I must know myself first. At the core of my work is love. If I did not love the world, my community, my students, myself, I would not be compelled to fight for justice. I conceptualize love as an act of resistance to the oppressive conditions that govern our lives in this system that is fueled by capitalist greed and White supremacy. I refuse to acquiesce and accept the current reality, so I must imagine a world beyond what is and fight for it with every ounce of my being. *Currere* allows me to look back and examine the pain of my past without placing judgement and without feeling shame. bell hooks (2002) wrote, “pain has opened us up—given us the opportunity to learn from our suffering—to make ourselves ready for the love that is promised” (p. 14). Keeping in mind that “true love begins with self-love,” in order to do the hard work required in fighting for liberation and justice, we must love ourselves and one another fiercely (hooks, 2002, p. 14). To love one another we must know that “understanding is the very foundation of love” (Nhat Hanh, 1991, p. 85) and that “the heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be” (hooks, 2000, p. 33). Thus, in order to truly love myself and others, I must first understand myself.

Currere provides a method for self-reflection and understanding, because it is a complex conversation between past, present, and future selves (Pinar, 2012). I use this to examine my past to understand how my present and future educator-activist-scholar-self came to be. Freire (2005) suggests, “It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving in. In short, it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, well-thought-out capacity to love” (p. 5). Someone once told me, we teach who we are (see Palmer, 1998). At the time, I don’t think I quite grasped the meaning of those words, but now, I see so clearly what that means. It’s a deeply personal truth that connects me to all that I do and continually motivates me to push forward, even when times get tough. At first, I couldn’t see myself—I was lost—covered in invisible ink, erased out of existence. I was living but without a true purpose and passion. However, it was always there, hiding just beneath the surface. One day, it was as if someone had wiped away the invisible ink, and I was looking at myself as if through a very clean window pane. I was looking at myself from the outside, marveling at all I had failed to see for so many years. What a painful, yet beautiful, process it is to become someone—the person you can recognize when you look in the mirror—the person who truly embodies the words of Ghandi: “happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are all in harmony.” I am an educator-activist-scholar. But, many things happened before I became the me I am today, and this story is still in the making. We are always in the process of becoming. *Currere* provides a lens to look back at the past, to make sense of the present, and to step into the future. Looking back gives me the clarity I need to be the educator-activist-scholar I am today and to “reclaim an authentic self” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2004, p. 493).

When I was still afraid...

*I was afraid to speak because I was terrified that you
would see the real me and you would reject me.*

*You would read my body and speech as a text to be
Interpreted and critiqued.*

*You would see that I am an outsider, someone who
fails to fit on either side of the borders and boundaries
that have been created to other and silence.*

*I was afraid you would clearly see all my deficits and laugh
at the incompetent girl that could never quite get it right.*

*Yet, I realized if I never spoke, if I remained silent, no one
would ever know who I was and they would never hear the
important things I have to say.*

*So I became more afraid not to speak.
I broke the silence because of and in spite of all my insecurities,
and I took the risk of rejection.*

*Because I would rather you reject the woman I have become than
the girl you expect me to be.*

Audre Lorde believed that fear should not stop us from fighting for freedom and liberation. She reminded us that silence will not protect us and was clear when she expressed, “When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak” (Lorde, 1978, p. 32). Lorde (1984) emboldened many forward, womanist, and feminist thinkers by suggesting “that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (p. 40). Now, as I struggle to find my footing in the academy, I continually bring those wise words to life, even when I am afraid. Until the last breath of air leaves my body, I will fight for justice, and I will speak my truth.

**LOOKING BACK TO UNDERSTAND THIS MOMENT AND THE MOMENTS TO COME:
MY LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF RESISTANCE...TRACES OF FEAR, RESIDUE OF PAIN**

*Before going back to college, I knew I didn't want to be an intellectual, spending my life
in books and libraries without knowing what the hell is going on in the streets. Theory
without practice is just as incomplete as practice without theory. The two have got to go
together:*

—Assata Shakur (1987)

bell hooks (2010) talks about the importance of telling the whole story—“I am because the story is”—and so I share a small piece of my story, to lay the foundation, to allow understanding and insight into why the work I do, both in and outside of the

academy, matters to me (p. 50). It is important that I understand and articulate my past, because “without the past there is no present” (Pinar, 2012, p. 59).

I come from a strong family of resisters, but not the revolutionary kind, at least not at first glance. I am a product of resistance, and I have, therefore, embodied resistance for most of my life. Sometimes, it has been in a form that is quite visible and disruptive, but for the most part it has been a silent, smoldering resistance that burned from the inside out—often suffocating my own growth and wellness. From a young age, I learned lessons of resistance by watching my mother and my grandmother. At the time, I didn’t know I was learning to resist; it was just part of my life—unobserved and unexamined. Of course, resistance that is embodied but not fully understood can be dangerous and counterproductive. Throughout my time as a graduate student, I sought to understand how resistance might be more productive (i.e. by working alongside those most impacted by systemic oppression in order to create the conditions for a more just society).

Many people have conceptualized my growing up in a single-headed household, raised by a circle of all women, as a deficit. The absence of men was, and still is, a form of resistance that most people don’t understand. Unknowingly, I began to absorb feminism at a young age as I watched the women I looked up to consistently break gender norms and push back against hegemonic forms of social control that I didn’t even know existed. I also understood from a young age that, despite our nation’s platitudes, everyone is not equal, and being a woman meant you were likely to receive less pay for the same job. This lack of equality had a direct economic and psychological impact on my family as I grew up, and unfortunately, not much has changed. My family still struggles financially, despite the fact that my mom has always worked multiple jobs and will likely never be able to retire.

I grew up in a neighborhood that was created for poor people, an isolated community of sorts to keep the great unwashed, the poor, stashed away, out of sight—out of mind. In this way, I can understand how it feels to be pushed in and out of communities through the process of gentrification. Subsidized housing was a necessity for my family, and the lack of subsidized and affordable housing in communities hits close to home. As a society, we often want to hide poverty so that we don’t have to look at it and trouble why some have so much while others have so little. Growing up, I learned to feel ashamed of our poverty, and this had a very detrimental impact on my self-esteem, something I still often struggle to overcome. It seemed that, every time I had a kernel of hope, something to be proud of, it would be crushed, and I would have to start all over again. I can’t tell you that there weren’t times in my life where I gave up, where I had no hope—because that would be a lie. This feeling of hopelessness and my lack of self-worth had a direct impact on my schooling experience.

I resisted in ways that were unproductive and harmful to myself. I skipped school, refused to do my work, was suspended frequently, and eventually, was pushed out of high school. The resistance I embodied did, in fact, reinforce my social position, but thankfully, I have moved beyond this self-defeating form of resistance. I am also thankful for my experiences, because I have a deep understanding of the ways in which institutions, particularly schools, push some students to the margins and limit their choices and chances in society. When I hear what some teacher educators and pre-service teachers say about students who don’t seem to care, it takes me back to a time when I felt marginalized and small in the space of the school. Part of the reason I am compelled to be involved in education is to disrupt the deficit narratives that continue to marginalize many students in schools today.

My own self-doubt, a ghost that continues to haunt me, often causes me to be silent, particularly in the academy. It's hard to navigate the space between voice and silence, and I have also had to learn to be okay with the fact that I am fueled by both anger and love. I cannot separate the two, and I refuse to apologize for being both angry and loving. Sometimes, I remain silent because what I may want to express at the time could be perceived as rage—not acceptable in most spaces, particularly in academia. But, I am angry about injustice, and I am tired of the willful ignorance and denial of so many in the academy. Some of us resist because it is the only way we can be—we resist out of necessity, and sometimes, we resist to struggle for a better reality. Despite my own history of resistance, I have learned through much trial and error that resistance can be productive. There is power and hope in our collective ability to resist the oppressive forces that seek to hold us down.

This work hurts. I feel the pain deep in my bones, and sometimes, I just want to run away. Due to my unearned advantages as a White woman, I could stop fighting and still be successful in the academy, but then I would be abandoning who I am and abandoning my colleagues, friends, and students of color, who have to fight just to be here. So, I have no choice but to stay and fight. As stated by Freire (1970),

The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. The individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. (p. 39)

I refuse to be afraid. When people act out of fear, they make terrible decisions. They do harm.

Do good because we, deep in our hearts, authentically feel like doing it, and it would be an expression of love. Do good in order to avoid judgement or punishment, and it would be an expression of fear. (Abundantlee, 2017)

I, instead, choose to act from a deep place of love, and my resistance is the true embodiment of a radical orientation to love.

I AM AN EDUCATOR-ACTIVIST-SCHOLAR

During the five years I spent in grad school fighting to get my PhD, I was trying desperately to figure out how to merge two identities that mean so much to me—activist and educator. During that time, I had no illusions that I could ever be a scholar, but after graduating with my PhD, something began to slowly change. Both of those identities, activist and educator, were powerfully present in the final write-up of my dissertation. One of the folks who helped me understand how to become an educator-activist-scholar in the academy was my mentor, friend, and comrade Tom Dutton. He was a beautiful soul, a person of great integrity, and someone who always seemed to act out of a deep sense of love and commitment for justice. A quote that I will always hold near and dear to my heart is:

The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 181)

Tom helped me understand how to keep one foot in the academy and both feet on the ground in the community. He helped me realize how absurd it is to talk about justice in the academy while watching the world crumble around us. If you want to teach about the struggle, you have to be in the struggle. As Paulo Freire (2005) stated, “without any serious living with the theory, is as scientifically wrong as is the idea of making speeches, giving theoretical lessons, without taking into consideration the concrete reality” (p. 143). The things I learned in Tom’s class, in standing shoulder to shoulder at protests and community organizing meetings and from his fierce stance on fighting for justice, are an invaluable part of who I am as a scholar, an educator, an activist, and a human being. I became more critically conscious and more radical in my orientation to the world and the political climate due to his mentorship and support. Thank you my friend; you left an imprint on my soul.

I came into the university with many questions and with a hope that I could somehow impact the world in a positive way. Through this journey, I have come to understand that social change can only come through collective struggle and that collective struggle must happen both in and outside of the university. This collective struggle requires us to interrogate our own privilege and to ask our students to do the same. This work takes an emotional toll and requires engagement with heart, mind, and body in ways that others may see as superfluous, too emotional, unnecessary, and—worse yet—un-academic, and unprofessional. At the risk of being taken less seriously, I speak and act in ways that are congruent with my social and political orientation to the world. I refuse to remain silent about the things that matter in order to be accepted as part of the mainstream. I refuse to conform (although we are all complicit) to a system that oppresses, marginalizes, and perpetuates inequality. Instead, I take my place in the academy to “talk back” and push for more radical and transformative approaches to education and action that will lead to social change (hooks, 1989). I am not here for recognition or acceptance—I am here to stand for what I conceptualize as justice.

Working in the service of social justice requires a different orientation to education, and it requires one to take risks. As a White woman, I have a ton of privilege that allows me to more easily take these risks, and I will not stand by and watch my brothers and sisters in the struggle take risks while I sit and soak up my privilege. I urge my colleagues and comrades reading this to push for radical, social change in all of the spaces in which they find themselves. We must fight for equity and justice out of a deep sense of love, what Freire (2005) referred to as “armed love” (p. 74). There are lives at stake when we remain silent about the things that matter. We must collectively push back against the many injustices we see, and we must do it in the academy and in the streets.

REMEMBER YOUR ROOTS...PLANT SEEDS, EMBODY LOVE AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

Remember your roots, the seeds of resistance sowed into the soil with love, and hope for the future will be the freedom fighters who emerge tomorrow. Sometimes, we fail to realize that students are in the process of becoming, but we also forget that so are we. We need to hold each other accountable but from a place of love and compassion. We need to look forward in order to see “what is not yet present” (Pinar, 2012, p. 46). When we are working with students, we need to make sure we are leaving space for them to grow. When we cut them off or shut them down because they are not where we think they should be, we do harm. This goes for students of all ages.

Love and support goes a lot further than empty criticism and rejection. Some people spend their whole lives feeling rejected and unloved, but it's amazing how much we can accomplish when someone values and sees us. I'm speaking from experience. So, when you see a student struggling (in any way), remember that they need encouragement and support; treat them the way you would want someone to treat you if you were struggling. One of my students stated in a final reflection,

I see how my oblivious friends and family perpetuate oppression, and it kills me because I now see clearer how it affects real people. It hurts me. But, I'm glad I know. I now have the opportunity to stop hurting and start healing.

As I look back at the past, I do so as a way to make space and to light a path for future educator-activist-scholars. I see you—I hear you—I love you.... I'll be waiting for you down the road. Don't give up freedom-fighter. Your path may be non-linear and painful, but you'll get there too.

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