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Of All Days: Critical Pedagogy Outside the Classroom¹

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Abstract: A student at the author's college pens a racist column on immigration for the school newspaper. Two departments, including the author's, send campus-wide emails denouncing the rhetoric. A firestorm erupts, as much over the emails as over the op-ed. Years later, the student visits the author unannounced.

Key Words: immigration, racism, college teaching, teachable moment, antiracist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, radical pedagogy, social justice education, transformative education, autoethnography

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaull, 2000, p. 34)

We need teachers who can engage their students around justice-related topics in the level of dialogue and reflection that produces compassionate wisdom and, out of that wisdom, transformative action to alleviate human suffering. (Chubbuck, 2007, p. 262)

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Tuesday, April 30, 2013: my first day back to school after a weekend of personal and relational upheaval. I clawed my way through a 75-minute round of emotional final presentations in my Writing Lives class and supervised a workshop of projects in Researching Media and Culture.

Home awaits. Three student appointments, then a 12-minute drive and a collapse onto the sofa.

Nicholas enters with a printed copy of his methods section. I channel my focus to give the pages a global read. He dutifully takes notes as I suggest what to expand and what to move to the Results/Discussion. "This really helped," he says. "See you Thursday, Dr. T."

Two 15-minute blocks, then home.

Gabriella greets me warmly, asking if I will review the autoethnographic component of her paper on protest movements. I smile as I read, noting how far the project has come. "Terrific work," I tell her. "Just keep breathing life into the text: more active verbs, more scenic description."

"I can do that," she says, sounding relieved. "Thank you so much!"

One more before the H and E envelop my Om. Huh-ooooommm.

I expect Malea to round the corner with the latest draft of a spoken-word poem on visiting her best friend in prison. Instead, a young woman I vaguely recognize appears at my door.

"Doctor Tillmann?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Andy,"² she says, and now I know. Today. *Of all days.*

² A pseudonym; other identifying details have been changed as well.

More than three years ago, on February 17, 2010, Andy, then a first-year student, wrote a column on immigration for the school newspaper, constructing the undocumented as leeches. Its companion illustration featured a bug-like alien helping itself to the easy chair, television, and snacks of a young white man, who looks on in disgust.

My dear friend and colleague, Pauline Robinson (a longtime ally to marginalized communities), posted a response to the Web version. She then enlisted her department's support in sending a campus-wide email that denounced the rhetoric and communicated solidarity with those who could be harmed by it. Pauline asked if I would seek my department's consent to do the same. I did, and we did. A firestorm erupted, as much over the two emails as over the op-ed and illustration.

On February 24, nearly 300 people packed a town hall at our small college. Some attendees branded Pauline and me (and secondarily our departments) as enemies of free speech, even as "bullies."

Salon.com covered the controversy on February 26. Two days later, Glenn Beck of Fox "News" gave Andy and two other members of the newspaper staff a national platform to proclaim their First Amendment rights (which no one had questioned) and their status as victims of ... what? Having their mass-communicated ideas challenged via two internal emails?

"How do we affirm student 'voices,'" ask Giroux and Simon (1989, p. 250), "while simultaneously encouraging the interrogation of such voices?"

In the echo chamber, the thinking seems to be: I have the right not only to say whatever I want—no matter how ignorant or cruel—but also to be free from criticism. I don't have to concern myself with the impact of my rhetoric, yet others (especially

progressive faculty) must protect my fragile ego at any cost. With no cognitive dissonance, I can say out one side of my mouth, “Go back to Mexico, illegals!” and out the other, “Mom, those faculty hurt my feelings!”

Flash forward to five days ago: April 25, 2013. Andy, soon to graduate, pens her final column. In it she states that her views today are radically different from those she held as a first-year student. Andy admits she reacted defensively to critiques of her 2010 op-ed, but she does not apologize for—or even acknowledge—harm caused by her rhetoric. Instead, Andy’s column takes a final swipe at two campus-wide-emailing PhDs, i.e. Pauline and me.

And now, here Andy stands. In the flesh. Today. *Of all days*. Without rising, I behold the columnist and extend my right hand. Andy looks down at it, pauses ... and shakes it, neither firmly nor weakly. I gesture toward the chair in front of me, and she sits.

A teachable moment I never envisioned, I think, and the pantry of my emotional reserves lies all but bare.

Almost immediately, *her* eyes fill with tears. *What The Fuck?* My mouth falls open, but no words come. Reflexively, I reach for the box of Kleenex on my desk, handing it to her. She looks at the box, pauses ... and takes it.

“I don’t know why I’m crying,” she says.

Sensing we both have been decentered by our co-presence, I nod and wait.

At last, Andy tells me, “I ... I wanted to say that what happened three years ago deeply affected me.”

Her blue and my brown eyes lock. My mind whirs, and I only can think to offer an observation: “I see and hear the distress.”

She tucks shoulder-length, coal-black hair behind her right ear. “Your emails had such an impact.”

“The *emails* did?” Her tears remind me of her youth; her words suggest a continued lack of accountability. How to regard this columnist as both a student (though not *my* student) and an adult? “What about your 2010 column?” I ask. “Have you thought about how your words affected immigrant members of our faculty, staff, and student bodies and of the broader community? Did you think no one would stand at their side and call out that rhetoric as racist?”

Andy’s face flushes. “I am not a racist.”

“I am not talking about you,” I say as gently as I can. “I’m talking about the discourse. I have no access to your intentions or your heart. I only have access to what you say, do, and write.”

She responds, “The school bars students from sending campus-wide messages, so I couldn’t respond to what you wrote.”

“I didn’t take the issue off campus,” I point out. “You did. A lot more people saw you on *Glenn Beck* than read our emails.”

Andy pushes her chair away from the table, saying, “I didn’t come here to debate.”

Now anger rises in my chest. “Why *did* you come? You sought me out, not the reverse. Did you expect one-way communication—from you to me? That’s the kind you offered in your column three years ago and again in your parting shot on Friday.”

On the drive home, my mind will ask her, *Why now? If this controversy was so present three years later that you’d devote your last column to it, why not seek me out a week ago? Rather than popping off in ignorance, like you did in 2010, why not ask to interview me on the*

record—BEFORE you write the column? Isn't that what a journalist with four years experience does? Have you learned nothing from all this, except how to be a victim?

Andy says nothing but remains seated.

I exhale, wondering what might happen if I seek connection. What could I concede that might mean something to her but wouldn't compromise my principles? "When this erupted, Andy, I didn't know that students no longer could send blanket emails. I only became aware of that through this controversy. I can understand why that would feel unfair. Had you wanted to send a campus-wide response, I hope any faculty or staff member would have facilitated that. I would have—though I might have been the last person you would have asked." I smile just a bit, seeing if I can get her to do the same.

She dabs her nose.

Later, I will learn from Pauline that the administration did give Andy the opportunity to respond via an all-campus email, an offer she declined.

"In your last column," I continue, "you talked about majoring in history. You said your views have changed since 2010. As someone raised Catholic in a small rural town, I relate to that. My views changed throughout my undergraduate and graduate educations, and they continue to evolve. I suspect that, if you took the time to get to know me, you'd find we are much more similar than different." I stop myself before adding, *And if you'd taken the time to get to know immigrant members of the community before publishing that stupid-ass column, we wouldn't be having this conversation.*

We sit in silence for several moments. "Are you planning a career in journalism?" I ask.

She exhales quickly through her nose, then offers an emphatic "No."

“Your public persona has been affected by this,” I say.

“Oh, yes.” Indeed, to this day, if you Google her name, the Salon.com piece is the top result.

“In that, you and Pauline Robinson have something in common. Though seven faculty signed those emails, people defending you and/or the views you expressed targeted Dr. Robinson in a smear campaign. Unlike your 2010 column, which has been taken down, the pages disparaging my colleague—and their racism, sexism, and weightism—remain active.”

“I had nothing to do with those,” Andy insists.

I find myself wanting to believe her. “You wrote a column in your first year of college,” I say. “Did anyone with more experience advise, ‘This will appear in print and online. It will be part of your permanent reputation. Internship directors, graduate school admissions committees, and prospective employers will have access to this?’”

“No one,” she replies.

“Did your editor warn, ‘This column uses strong, provocative language. Expect equally strong responses?’”

“No.”

“It’s my understanding that no faculty or staff reviews content before publication.”

“That’s correct,” Andy tells me, “and at the time, we had no faculty advisor.”

I sigh. “For what it’s worth, Andy, I don’t believe you received the mentorship you deserved, and I feel angry and sad that you continue to suffer the consequences.”

Seeming not to know what else to do, she rises from her chair.

Later, I will worry that I too fully absolved her—relocated responsibility once again away from her rhetoric, transferring it to a lack of editorial and faculty oversight.

Later, I will regret that I didn't apologize for using Andy's name in my department's email, a decision I questioned many times in the past three years. The rhetoric mattered, not the 19-year-old columnist's identity, which anyone interested easily could have found. I will wish I had acknowledged that our email, like her 2010 column, was insufficiently fact-checked. (That email, which I wrote, used a male pronoun to refer to Andy).

Later, I will reflect on how much of the talking I did and how little I still know about Andy. What lessons, if any, did she glean from our conversation? Did she talk with anyone about it, and if so, who am I in her narrative? What does my character in her story say and do? Is my character more round and human than before this visit? Do I, in her script, remain a "bully"?

Later, I will worry that my department's email and/or my interaction with Andy may have, in one or more ways, constituted "an authoritarian multiculturalism" (Cammarota, 2011, p. 65) that closed rather than opened possibilities for dialogue. How might I have engaged more fully in critical, transformative, and radical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2007; Giroux & Simon, 1989; hooks, 1994), practices that foster consciousness about privilege and oppression and spark an active commitment to social justice, advocacy, and change?

Later, I will consider asking Andy to co-author this piece. Pauline and I will talk through the opportunities and risks of that. Eventually, I will reject the idea, worried that even the invitation could result in Pauline being further targeted. Nothing in my friend's

professional life had a deeper impact than the online smear campaign related to this controversy.

Later, for whatever reason, Andy will elect not to seek out Pauline. For this, I will feel grateful. Pauline has taken the brunt of the public hits; I could withstand this one private encounter. Still, I will wonder: why me—and me alone? During our conversation, did I say or do something liberatory and/or healing that helped Andy find closure? Did I say or do something insensitive that left Andy feeling even more alienated? Was Pauline simply not in her office when Andy came calling?

Later, I will return home to my personal and relational upheaval. I will collapse onto the sofa, aware that I have expended some of my last emotional reserves. I will recognize that, despite the depletion, I spoke from my deepest convictions and did my best to balance empathy and accountability, compassion and wisdom. Perhaps *not* having deep reserves made me more accessible and vulnerable, and perhaps that disarmed Andy—hopefully in a constructive way. I will remember the words of Parker Palmer (2007, pp. 11-12): “The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able.”

But in this moment, on this day *of all days*, I will rise as she departs my office and say the only remaining thing that comes to mind: “I wish you well, Andy.” And I sincerely do.

Epilogue

Sunday, August 24, 2014, I send the following email to all students, advertising a new course I’m teaching:

Have you been following the events in Ferguson? Are you concerned, not only about the killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, but about what it

says about where we are in the journey toward racial and class equality?

5 seats left!

CMC 325: Incarceration and Inequality

Wednesdays, 4-6:30 PM, Reeves Lodge

Course Description: As of 2010, U.S. jails and prisons held 2.26 million people—more than work for Wal-Mart worldwide. The U.S. incarcerates more people than any other country. Class, race, nationality, and sex profoundly affect a person's interactions with official "justice" systems, influencing, e.g., who gets stopped, patted down, searched, arrested, and/or charged; who receives what kind of legal representation (if any); who is prosecuted, pressured to plead guilty, and/or convicted; who does time and how much. This course examines ways privilege and inequality manifest in, e.g., the War on Drugs; the militarization of policing; prison privatization; solitary confinement; the death penalty; and extrajudicial imprisonment, torture, and killing.

I predict you will find material here sobering, shocking, and infuriating. If such feelings arise and you find your consciousness raised, those will be important first steps. But we will not stop there. We will look deeply and learn to see more clearly in order to understand better what to do. Then we will practice actually doing it.

A great course for future lawyers, community organizers, and elected officials!

To this advertisement, I receive three responses, two from women interested in signing on, one from, I learn later, a white male whose father is a multimillionaire. His email reads (in its entirety):

This is completely absurd. I have been following the events very closely and I am always up to date with current world events. The uneducated individual would would [sic] be mislead [sic] by this email into thinking that we as a country jail too many people instead of looking at the real problem, the people themselves. I will definitely not be attending the misinforming event but thank you for the invite and making it aware to me that Rollins does not have it's [sic] head on straight and something should be changed.

And so it continues...

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Lisa M. Tillmann is an activist researcher, documentary filmmaker, and professor of critical media and cultural studies at Rollins College. Her book and films include: *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*; [*In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight*](#); [*Weight Problem: Cultural Narratives of Fat and "Obesity"*](#); [*Off the Menu: Challenging the Politics and Economics of Body and Food*](#); and [*Remembering a Cool September*](#).