The Courage to See Clearly

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I do not ask the wounded person how he feels,
I myself become the wounded person.
—WALT WHITMAN, “SONG OF MYSELF”

English classrooms are fertile ground for human growth and development. Because the nature of our content mastery rests firmly on students’ ability to consider and, ultimately, challenge the world around them, we are likewise charged with the task of introspection and transformation through the confrontation of our own schemas. In fact, our ability to encourage students to think differently about their lives and the lives of others must necessarily be promulgated by our own intentional efforts to be the change we desire to see. Our striving to produce citizens who are both capable and qualified to lead the world calls for us to assume roles as advocates, because serving as allies is no longer enough.

Moreover, the days of English teachers’ harping on the social ills of solecisms and of lackluster lexicons are all but over. They have only served to promote an intellectual elitism that encourages students to sympathize with Chicanax characters in Anaya’s novel Bless Me, Ultima, while sitting idly by as our government terrorizes families who are seeking political asylum by separating children and their parents and by holding refugees in concentration-style camps at the US border. What on Earth have we become?

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

It was all according to the way you see things. Some people could look at a mudpuddle and see an ocean with ships.
—ZORA NEALE HURSTON, THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

The sociologist C. Wright Mills first coined the term sociological imagination and defined it as what “enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (6). In his seminal text by the same name, Mills suggested that our sociological imagination helps us think critically and helps us make sense of our personal place within biography and in history. In short, it gives us the means to understand how we, as individuals, are shaped by and are also shaping society’s bigger picture.

Because we are all interconnected and our lives are interwoven, it becomes impossible to know yourself without viewing your experiences through the lives and experiences of others. Poignant examples of this precept are the Mayan concept of “In Lak’ech: You Are My Other Me” and the Sanskrit greeting “Namaste.” Both concepts challenge us to honor the divinity within ourselves by honoring the divinity within others. We need to rid ourselves of the assumption that students are empty vessels, eagerly

FIGURE 1. The coming-of-age novel Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo A. Anaya was first published in 1971.

FIGURE 2. The novel Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston was first published in 1937.
awaiting our wisdom and academic knowledge to fill their lives with meaning. Rather, they come into our classrooms filled with the experiences, knowledge, and wisdom we desperately need to expand our own sociological imagination.

As educators, we help students expand their sociological imagination through the construction and investigation of meaning daily. Yet, how many of us actively engage in the same practice? What might that look like in terms of our personal and professional praxes? Moreover, how might our classroom dynamics—including the content we choose to teach—be transformed by renewing our own minds? What could happen if we simply asked about ourselves, our students, and our texts: “What else could this mean?” Finally, consider this invitation by Carl Sagan to reckon with the implications of life, power, and truth:

Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every “superstar,” every “supreme leader,” every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known. (6–7)

The excerpt above is from a speech Sagan delivered at Cornell University on October 13, 1994. The words were inspired by an image transported on February 14, 1990, from Voyager 1, a space probe launched by NASA in 1977 to study the outer solar system. Sagan admonishes us to do more than merely coexist. His words serve as an auspicious reminder that without you, I am nothing.

Thus, with gratitude and anticipation, hear your students’ hearts saying the words by Chinua Achebe as they enter your classroom each day: “There is no story that is not true” (99).

As you look into the eyes of each student, speak softly within yourself: “There are no deficits here. There are only fellow seekers who have joined me in a quest for understanding and enlightenment.” Furthermore, see their color. See their ethnicity. See their preferred gender. See their spirituality. See them wholly, because pretending to not see rejects the wealth of consciousness that these experiences have been sent to teach you.

Rather than force-feeding them the literary canon, challenge them (and yourself) with texts that stretch their sociological imagination, offering opportunities to critique their own space within historical narratives and biographies. The world around them is ever-changing, and we violate our ethical responsibility to “first, do no harm” if we willingly continue to overlook our own ignorance.

Giving students the novel To Kill a Mockingbird without also strategically providing space to challenge mob mentality, equal justice, and police brutality is careless. Your students have at least heard the name Philando Castile and the names of countless other people of color who were murdered by those who pledged their own lives to protect and serve. Likely, they will draw comparisons to Tom
Robinson’s murder in the novel, and many may even experience deeper emotional trauma if careful thought is not given to providing context for the story and how it relates to ongoing racial injustices within the culture.

We need to give them the tools to effectively engage in civil discourse surrounding the texts traditionally taught by opting for new ones or by pairing them with more culturally relevant ones. Some examples of authors whose works might easily replace a variety of canonical texts include Kwame Alexander, Jacqueline Woodson, Julia Alvarez, Daniel José Older, Angela Johnson, and Cynthia Kadohata. Teach them how to advocate for themselves by allowing them to challenge hierarchy in the selection of new classroom texts. Then, stand with them as they question the limits of their own humanity as it undoubtedly rubs against the humanity of others.

Within all of us lies a longing—an achingly painful desire to belong. We want to be seen and understood and acknowledged in the most intimate ways. We look for places to fit in and for people who welcome us with open arms, not places of judgment and criticism.

Hopefully, your classroom is already such a space and you endeavor each day to maintain an environment of both academic excellence and emotional growth. However, you may be keenly aware that more work remains to be done.

The right time to do the right thing is always right now. So, steady yourself to stand firmly in the face of adversity and complacency. With the courage to see clearly, say to yourself what you have so often said to the students you love: “Do your work.”

WORKS CITED


The Poet

I wonder what will not get written if I decide not to write a poem today. So much responsibility for the poet to bear. All he asks is to work with words and he’s saddled with the weight of the world.

—MATTHEW J. SPIRENG
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EXPLORING COLOR HIERARCHIES

Cover Photo: Twelve Manos by Hannah Simone Smith

Hannah Simone Smith, who has been creating art since she was twelve, is a tenth-grader at Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta, Georgia. She created Twelve Manos last year when she was in ninth grade for an interdisciplinary class called GAGA: Geography, Art, and Global Awareness, co-taught by Lieu Nguyen (art) and Kenyatta Bennett (social studies). The assignment invited students to create a mandala to represent an NGO (non-governmental organization). Mandalas are cosmic diagrams that remind us of our relationship to the universe. Hannah chose to research the Union of South American Nations, an intergovernmental regional organization comprising twelve South American countries.