

The Process of Knowing and Learning: An Academic and Cultural Awakening

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The old people say being Indian today is like having your feet in two canoes. One foot in one canoe, one foot in another; one foot in one world, one foot in another. Trying to balance both canoes at the same time while the water underneath is constantly changing; trying to live in two worlds, while the rules are constantly changing. This is what it is like for my students of color, as well as for me. Trying to live in the Western world, while trying desperately to hold on to our cultural world of difference. Trying to hold on to a language that is not acknowledged as legitimate by the dominant culture, trying to hold on to traditions that appear irrelevant to the Western mind, and trying desperately to hold on to an identity that can become so easily consumed by Levi jeans, TV, and Big Macs. So, I try to integrate my world into my teaching methods. I try to build bridges between worlds, instead of trying to exchange one for the other. I try to help my students feel pride in where they come from so that they don't feel ashamed of who they are or who they want to be. As I encourage them, I become encouraged. As I lift them up, they lift me up. As I believe in them, they believe in me. As they become transformed, I become transformed.

My students come from diverse backgrounds. Many identify themselves as Mexican American, others Mexican, some Latino, still others Chicano. There are Asian Americans, more specifically identified as Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and Southeast Asian Americans. Also represented are African Americans, Africans, American Indians, East Indians and Puerto Ricans. Included in this diverse representation are Euro-Americans, Jewish Americans, and gay and lesbian persons. Although all groups are not identified in every class, the classes do tend to be diverse regarding race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Even with this diversity, the group most representative is Euro-American.

I teach a variety of courses in psychology at a community college with a focus on race, class, and gender issues. These courses include: Psychological Principles of Racism and Sexism, Social and Ethnic Relations, Psychology of Identity, Introduction to Psychology, and Human Sexuality. As I see it, there are no curriculum boundaries when addressing issues of race, class, and gender. Indeed, for some students the process of understanding and knowing begins in one class and continues in another. The issues, and the knowing, thread across specific courses. In the Western world this is referred to as the academic journey; in my world it is called the continuous circle or the life hoop.

The old people say "you come in from the spirit world with all the answers to any question that could be put before you while you are here." This is a pretty good job I have being a teacher, I tell my students. I come to class, present some ideas, guide some discussion about those ideas, and collect my paycheck on the first of every month. "I teach you nothing," I tell my students. "I only facilitate bringing forth that which you already know." Many of them look at me in amazement, "What's she talking about?" Others look at me with a sigh of relief, as if they can't believe their ears; as if they've been waiting for a teacher to say this all their lives. As if they already knew, but had never had it validated. Regardless of the students' initial reaction, within a short 17 weeks many come to believe they do have the answers. Many begin to believe in themselves.

Let me provide some images of these 17 remarkable weeks. In the beginning of the semester, students file into the classroom ready to be entertained or "talked at" or told what to think and do. No teachers, or only a few, have ever told them that what they think is important. I tell them to "think for themselves." Again, they look at

me as if I don't know what I'm talking about, yet they are intently listening to every word that falls out of my mouth. They watch me just as intently as I walk across the room and speak directly to them. I wonder privately to myself, how few people in their lives, perhaps, have spoken this truth to them. I ask for their honest participation: "If you don't learn anything else in my class, I want you to learn to think for yourself." This is much more difficult than it sounds, much easier to say than do, I warn. Why? "Because most of you are still living in the shadow of others' voices. You are manifesting what your parents, coaches, priests, peers want you to think. Many of you just become an extension of their voice. Today and for the next 17 weeks you will take that journey on your own. You will journey into your own thoughts, your own opinions, your own questioning. You will challenge me, your peers, and yourself ... and you will awaken those voices within yourself that identify you."

This journey may appear at first to be inevitable, easy, automatic, but it is not. To the traveler, it is an individual awakening. For some students, it is so validating to hear a woman of color present such cultural thinking that they begin to respond almost immediately to their own voices. Other students respond more slowly, cautiously, even reluctantly. Their Western cultural experience does not invite them easily into the journey.

I continue to provoke my students: "You must know where you come from in order to know who you are today, in order for you to know where you are going tomorrow. We're talking about identity. "Whom or what do you identify with? Where are your roots?" I share my birth story with them, that I am here because of a dream my grandmother had, that there is a prophecy that came with my birth, that I come from a group of stars called the Pleiades. Again, they listen intently, even some of the students who don't want to listen because listening is not what they usually do, as listening is not honored in the Western world. But most of them listen and much of the time they want more than class time will allow. When this begins to occur I am reminded of sitting in the round house for hours or days listening to the old ones speak. I never thought of leaving the round house or questioning the old people, "When are they going to be through?" Although the young ones might not have understood all that was said, we knew the stories were important. This is the challenge of a "teacher" in the Western world — to make the subject matter important by bringing the stories, the voices to life.

To get the students started on their journey of self-discovery, I assign them Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" from *At the Bottom of the River*. I ask them to write their own girl/boy piece based on voices from their past. When they return to class, we put our chairs in a circle and they read their girl/boy piece. This provides an opportunity for me to learn about each of them, but the true revelation is what they learn about themselves as they read aloud their pieces and hear the voices of their pasts come to life. They are amazed at the similarities of the voices in the circle. It is a time of beginning, a time of reflection, a time of pondering. I am moved when they read their pieces, often to tears. Many read through their own tears and on occasion some choose not to read because it is just too moving for them. We finish the readings, I collect their pieces and keep them until the end of the semester.

When we return for the next class I have a box of crayons and a color assortment of paper awaiting. The students are instructed to take a sheet of paper and as many crayons as needed to create a large name tag. They may be as creative as they wish. They may use their entire name, nicknames, or only their preferred name. It's always fascinating to watch students respond to this exercise. There are those who go to work immediately drawing and coloring, while others sit and ponder, "Just what is the psychological purpose of this exercise?" Still, there are others who look at what others are doing, as if to see if they are "doing it right." It confirms for me the restriction that many students feel in relationship to who they are. For many they just want to "do it right." They are unfamiliar with their creative side, and find it difficult to relax and be in the moment with their self. Many just want the exercise to end and for me to "just lecture" to them. They want to be with the familiar. When the students finish, we once again form a circle and I instruct them to hold their name tags and share their names and any information about their names and/or name tags. The responses are varied, from comments about generations of a namesake to apologies for "that's just what they (parents) named me." Their names have no special meaning.

With this exercise I continue to get a sense of the person behind the name. The spirit behind the eyes continues to be revealed. More importantly, it is revealing to the individual student as he/she sits in the circle and listens to the stories behind “a name.” They recognize they all have their stories, their own voices; no one, though, has ever taken the time to ask them about their stories. No one has told them they could be proud to be called Roberto instead of Robert, or Maria instead of Marie, or Naoko instead of Nikki, or Ekaterina instead of Katia, or Ezgiamen instead of Amen. The transformation begins for many as they begin the journey of discovering who they are behind the mask of a name — their name, a name that has been changed in spelling and pronunciation to accommodate those who can’t or don’t want to take the time to pronounce it correctly. And the transformation begins for yet others who now question their own participation in the changing of another’s name, or lack of participation in keeping their own name.

I too make a name tag and share the story ... of my name, *Brenda Suzanne Eaglewoman Collins Flyswithhawks*. I too taste what it is to become more culturally aware — awake — each time I tell my story. I am released from the Western world and planted more deeply into the roots of my world as an Indian woman. Each time I share my name with my students I am reminded of who I am and where I come from. It is important that I model this for my students. Although I am teacher, I too am student. But my students do not see themselves as teachers. Is this the consequence of a silenced voice, of being “talked at” and not to? I am concerned for them. In the Western world they call it low self-esteem or lack of confidence. In my world the voice (teacher) within us all is acknowledged, respected, and nurtured. Our name is a reflection of who we are and where we come from. I liken the awakening of my students’ souls during this exercise to that of an eagle taking flight from her nest for the very first time, feeling the wind move and carry her to heights she has never dreamed.

I arrange the classroom seating into a circle as often as possible throughout our time together. The talking circle is a concept that is foreign to many Western students. Often they feel awkward, exposed or self-conscious. However, the more they participate in the circle the more they expect and look forward to the seating arrangement. I explain to my students that the circle represents honesty, respect, and equality. We are all equal when we come to the circle and we respect each other’s voices. The circle also allows us to look at the spirit of another instead of the back of another. This creates and encourages respect for others and their differences. The circle is a safe place where students begin to be honest with themselves, thus allowing them to be honest with others. Indeed, a cultural acknowledgement begins to take place, almost silently, as we begin to trust the process of the dialogue and see one another as peers rather than as competitors fighting for a grade. The circle is also inclusive in that the students begin to recognize that their voice is important. It encourages even the most silent student to participate. I sit in awe as I watch the simplicity — and power — of respect give voice to those students who dared not speak in class prior to the talking circle.

The conversation progresses and we talk about expectations and their influence on our identities. In the Western world, the world of the majority of my students, a person is expected to graduate from high school by age 18, graduate from college with a Bachelor of Arts, then graduate from graduate school with a Master of Arts. Why? Because “everyone else has their B.A.,” and by the time they get their M.A., they realize that an M.A. and 25 cents will get them a cup of coffee anywhere, so ... they get a Ph.D.! At the same time, my students are expected to fall in love, get married, have 2.5 children, make \$75,000 a year, and oh yes ... be happy. There persists this ever so gentle yet forceful boot out of their home into the “real world” to be on their own and “grow up.” It’s amazing to me that any of my students survive these pressures eloquently disguised as expectations. Again, I am concerned.

I share with my students that in my world an 18-year-old is not expected to leave home. Indeed, we are never encouraged to leave, rather we are encouraged to stay as long as we like, even into old age. We bury the umbilical cord of our children with the bones of their ancestors because we believe that no matter where their journey in life takes them, this assures us that they will always come home. Telling this story to my students invites them to discuss their needs, desires, and hopes for the future. The journey into their own identities continues; a sense of home, family, culture, and education as they visualize it is respected. They do not have to surrender who they are in order to live in the Western world. They do not have to change their names, stop speaking their language, or pretend to be something they are not. What they do have to do, or so I plead with

them, is be awake to how culture has shaped them and then decide for themselves where they stand in the midst of those forces. Our time together is this awakening process. It is a wonder to be a part of it.

In my world, I continue to share in the talking circle, a person is not considered an adult until they are 51 years of age. We believe it takes this long for a person to understand the mysteries that live within each of us. We are not expected to have our “acts together,” to be adult at the age of 21. I share this part of my world with my students with the hope of freeing them from the bondage of unquestioned expectations — that everything must be accomplished by a certain age in life. The sharing also reminds my students that everyone learns at a different pace. It offers support and encouragement to the re-entry students who are often struggling to feel comfortable in a classroom of students that are half their age. Again, the talking circle is about building respect and trust. The more we talk, the more we explore and question the power culture has in shaping us, the more we discover who we are, and who we hope to be.

Allow me to open one more window into my classroom by sharing a dramatic experience that occurred during a discussion on discrimination. After showing the film *Los Mineros*, based on Mexican American miners’ early 1900s struggle in the Southwest for equal pay and benefits, students, including some of the Mexican Americans, expressed shock and disbelief. This was a history that had been kept from them. They were ignorant of the degree to which Mexican Americans had been discriminated against; blind to the historical roots of this discrimination. They became angry. I used this as an opportunity to challenge the ignorance forced upon them by an unexamined education. I wanted them to know they never had to be duped — or seduced — again, by schools or society at large. I asked them, “How many of you want to be free?” They looked at me hesitantly, not sure where I was going with this question. I elaborated: “How many of you want to be free from prejudicial attitudes, stereotypical thinking, discriminatory behavior, inequality?!” As I expected, they unanimously raised their hands. As I had not expected, they were sitting on the edge of their seats, leaning forward, anticipating with hungry looks on their faces, waiting for what seemed to be the answer of a lifetime. I was moved beyond words, and said spontaneously, with fire under my belt, “READ!!” Read everything you can get your hands on. Read about your people by your people. Find and open the hidden books. Read with your critical eyes. Question, search, challenge the words. I wrote READ in bold letters on the board. I watched them write the word READ in their notebooks. It was as if the entire class was lifted above the floor. They got it! Indeed, they had been offered a challenge they couldn’t refuse.

They had been set free from past, unquestioned untruths. Free to find their own truths. I told them that no one could take away what they had just learned. No one could dupe them again. To read critically and not mindlessly, with piercing personal questions, was the secret to uncovering how they may have been silenced in their previous years of schooling, of listening to the mass media, and, generally, of surviving in a Western culture. Now, I told them, no one could take away the stories, the voices, the truth that reading with a searching, questioning heart could give them.

Over the next several weeks, many students rose to the challenge and discovered that the words on the written page, once read with passion and conviction, began to mirror their own voices. As they questioned and dug into their histories, their cultural identities took form. The written word and their inner voices journeyed together. The match, like the eagle in flight, set them free.

After this incident, we returned to the customary final class exercise. During the last week of class we revisit Kincaid’s “Girl.” However, now I ask the students to write their own girl/boy piece based on voices from the past 17 weeks, specifically, voices they have heard in regards to race, class, and gender. This assignment confirms for me that during this difficult process of self-discovery and attending to our hidden voices something sacred has occurred. In the Western world this is called “learning.” In my world the old people say that the answers that traveled with us from the spirit world have been revealed and true “knowing” has taken place.

Read everything you can get your hands on.
Read about your people by your people ...

Read with your critical eyes.
Question, search, challenge the words ...

Read ...
with piercing personal questions.
Uncover how you may have been silenced
by years of schooling,
by listening to the mass media,
and, generally,
by surviving in a Western culture ...

No one can take away the stories, the voices, the truth
that **READING** with a searching, questioning heart can give.