

THE THICKET

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CAVEAT: EMPTOR?

I gained a reputation in my household as the strange bird guy this year because during the ongoing pandemic and while the social diseases of racism and inequity rampaged in our justice system and politics and schools, to ease the pain of isolation and the stifling fear of the known and unknown, I ramped up my bird watching habits on our property just north of Cincinnati, Ohio. We have a beautiful tree-line in our backyard, and the region attracts and serves as the habitat for many indigenous and migrating birds. Especially in the springtime, the trees on our property, including pines, oaks, and maples, pop with the colors and the songs of their inhabitants such as the northern cardinal, wren, blue jay, mockingbird, indigo bunting, goldfinch, red bellied woodpecker, rose breasted grosbeak, house sparrow, rock pigeon, and the dreaded equalizer, the Cooper's Hawk, among others. There I go, listing my friends' names again. You see?

To ease the pain and fear and to earn my reputation in the household, I started taking pictures of them all. I needed beauty. I found it in the trees, and I started to deeply appreciate the birds, their beauty in flight, their beauty in song, their beauty in just being there despite what was happening with the rest of the world. It was the Shutterfly book I wrote and bought three copies of that truly did me in at home. I still think the pictures and their captions constitute some of my best work. And now it's fair to say that I love birds. But my family still constantly wonders if I am well.

As I watched the birds live from day-to-day and fed them and put out fresh water for them, I began to appreciate the most amazing aspect of their movement around our home to be their darting, purposeful, fearless flights in and around and THROUGH the thicket that borders the north edge of the property. During the spring as the leaves and branches of the thicket take shape and fill in, you can barely see through the bramble from 10 feet away. It's thick, really thick. And routinely birds just flew through it and out the other side unscathed. How did they do that and why? I imagined that they did it for protection, avoiding the flight of bigger birds who could poach them at any moment, and since we had seen the work of the Cooper's Hawk up close, we knew that the smaller birds had plenty to fear. I also imagined that they did it for expediency and perhaps just because they could as they went from point A to point B like any being on the mission that drives their existence. And, I thought, maybe they just liked flying fast and being carefree and feeling effective, because flying is what they do.

But as you know, no system for action or way of being is perfect, of course. Every so often we hear the plunk of a beautiful bird into one of our windows. Dead on the spot. A mistake, sometimes caused by the chase of the hawk (we have seen it happen!), and ultimately, I'm afraid, the demise of the "beautiful thing that was just flying, merely doing its thing" in an instant. The end comes so fast.

So I began to wonder: How can we soar again as human beings and be full of freedom and possibility and love, when we feel as though we are, and may actually be, grounded by hate? That is, how can we fly freely given the fact that our fates are so fragile and, perhaps, determined by others? What is the way forward through the thicket?

THE TASK AT HAND: THE FLIGHT I'M ON

I have been writing a series of *currere*-oriented articles for the *Currere Exchange Journal* since Issue 1.2 in 2017, focusing on curriculum fragments—small bits of

memories that continue to stick to me (Poetter & Googins, 2015)—that persistently influence my thinking and actions in my personal and professional lives (Poetter, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). The idea from the beginning has been to work my way through a series of aspects of life experience that have informed my educational journey and to theorize and speculate about their meaning and worth through the lens of seven life processes, borrowing from Louise Berman’s (1968) heuristic device in her curriculum text, *New Priorities in the Curriculum*.

My seven processes are:

Loving (Loved)
 Knowing (Known)
 Bullying (Bullied)
 Losing (Lost)
 Ignoring (Ignorant/Ignored)
 Removing (Removed)
 Hoping (Hopeful)

My goal is to build some momentum with the manuscripts toward a deeper understanding of myself by providing insights into life and educational experience that could guide my own and perhaps others’ curriculum and pedagogy. I am not putting forward the verbal forms that name certain processes in life and education as means for organizing curriculum for schools, as Berman did with hers in the late 1960s (though two of them overlap, “loving” and “knowing”). Instead, I posit that processes are excellent ways not only of planning for life and educational experiences, but also for understanding them, especially since life and educational experiences continue to teach us after the fact, perhaps *ad infinitum*.

So, I began in 2017 with a piece on “losing” and have puzzled my way through two pieces on “bullying” as well as one on “ignoring” in the years since with all of them appearing in different issues of this journal. This manuscript is on “loving.” In it, I explore the possibilities that have accrued in my own thinking and being from growing toward love, as I perceive love through the inescapable lenses of white supremacy and the times we live in now, and have been living in for many centuries, tortured to the last breath (literally) by the dominant structures of power embedded in the whiteness, the racism, of it all.

I position love here, in the midst of injustice and violence and structural racism, because for me the issue of our time, and certainly a long time in coming to the fore, finally after so many efforts to bring it, is how we as a people will work together toward the eradication of racism, and if that isn’t impossible, which I actually don’t think it is, then at least toward the erosion of it. As with other human-made evils that hound us non-stop, like bullying (bullying and racism sometimes go hand in hand), racism can only be countered by a powerful force that is stronger—love. This kind of powerful force is embodied in the lives and commitments of service and care as those depicted in Bettina Love’s (2019) third grade teacher, Mrs. Johnson, who according to Dr. Love cultivated a “collective spirit of accountability, love, and purpose” (p. 48) in her classroom for all children. How can we imagine a now and a future that is governed, directed, and inspired by love and not hate, in life, and in education, even schooling? And how do we grow to love each other across the boundaries that society has created and reified for us through our socialization into the norms of organizations, institutions, religions, political parties, etc., that stultify, teach us to hate, create distance, limit equity and opportunity, and, ultimately, foment alienation and misunderstanding?

LIAM NEESON SAID WHAT?

In February 2019, while engaged in a press interview for an upcoming movie release and in response to a question about a key aspect of the movie, revenge, actor Liam Neeson admitted that many years earlier, after learning about the rape of a friend, supposedly by a Black man, he spent a week roaming the streets hoping to engage with and exact revenge on any random Black person he encountered. Neeson's language describing the episode was much more graphic in the interview. He was insensitive, and his admission felt gratuitous at best. I was appalled at what he said and at the language he used as well and felt at the time that a person couldn't choose to say anything worse and that he certainly lacked remorse in the moment.

The fallout was swift. Some said Neeson should be castigated and he and his movies boycotted for his racism. Some said he should be applauded for admitting that we all have racist thoughts, for seeking help for his issues, and for feeling ashamed for what had happened (or not) during that time in his life so many years ago (Michallon, 2019).

When this episode with Neeson popped in the media, of course, so much was happening in the world related to the never-ending trauma for Black people in the U.S.—daily acts of racism, microaggression, and violence (and of course you know that it hasn't stopped and has gotten even worse, if that is possible!). And I was just beginning to consider writing this very piece on loving through the lens of racism when the Neeson news hit the TV and press writ large. My wife saw one of the news reports on a morning show and said point blank to me, "No one like Neeson or anyone else should ever say anything like that or write anything like that. There are certain things you just can't say. Nothing can justify thinking that or doing that or saying that. It's just wrong."

Her position, of course, challenged the very basis of the type of work that I want to do and have been doing and was just getting ready to have published in my first article about bullying, in which I was the bully. So I kept struggling with two positions. On the one hand, how can we depict hatred, prejudice, discrimination, racism in any form, and put it forward in any form, even if the ends are meant to reverse the passions and justifications behind the act or to seek forgiveness for the act itself (for either thinking about doing something or actually doing something), especially if we are the authors of the hate? On the other hand, how can we *not* depict it, surface it, admit it, and recognize the truth of the matter—that all white people in the United States (and perhaps throughout the entire world) have been socialized in a racist society and, therefore, whether we consciously recognize it or not, act in racist ways throughout our lives (Diangelo, 2018)?

White people, especially, need to keep saying it out loud until they themselves finish breathing, as long as the inequities caused by racist practices that white people and white institutions control and implement exist. If we keep it all inside, how do we help others see the parallel errors in their own lives, adjust and improve our own lives, and help create a new community, a society and world that is at least aware of racism even if it can't be completely eradicated? After all, love can only conquer all, in my opinion from an educational perspective, if the hidden is exposed, and if we take the step of expressing instead of repressing memory.

I made my peace with Liam Neeson, even if my wife didn't. And I have decided to continue working no matter what and to approach this topic in my own way with the best of intentions no matter how many pitfalls I fall into or create. Neeson's mistakes in his life are his, and we can probably learn something from all that has happened in the past two years and more, including his saga. And it's about time, if even in the most awkward of ways, to surface what has been and what could be. That's at least part of the work the *currere* approach fosters.

And I want to be as clear as I can about my own positionality on this journey. I have every advantage, at least in terms of how the white superstructure views me and has treated me, in terms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as a white, upper middle class, male, heterosexual. I have literally nothing to lose even if I make mistakes, which will bear out and will no doubt come to bear in this writing, whether I see them or not, which I probably won't. My intention isn't to create answers but to surface stories that lead to further questions. Maybe they will lead to possibilities. Maybe they will lead to love. Ultimately, I am convinced that we are taught the things that distance us and connect us, subtly and not so subtly by the world, by our families, by our communities, by our experiences and non-experiences. We all have our own stories to tell and to interrogate. I would like to hear more of them, not fewer of them, even the ugly ones. When we begin to tell more, with hearts and minds open to learning and reconciliation, my belief is that we can be better and heal. Maybe I'm wrong. Let's see.

In the following pages, I surface memories about race from my life, especially as they have to do with my encounters with Black lives, and attempt at the end of this work to interrogate them. You be the judge, and see if, in the end of it, even after reading this truncated, blathering mess of things, love is possible.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 1: BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL

The following memory is absolutely etched into my mind's eye. It's one that remains with me—that is inescapable. I don't quite know why, but I do suspect an answer. This is the first time I've ever told anyone about it. I can sometimes pinpoint my own approximate chronological age tied to longtime memories because of the location where the event took place. In this case, the church my father pastored remodeled the parsonage I lived in as a young boy in 1970, which displaced the family room to the other side of the house. The event below took place in the family room before the remodel, so I know I was no more than 7 years old.

My dad was a protestant pastor in a large mainline church in my hometown in Ohio, where I was born and raised until I went away to college at 18. My town was mostly white in a region that was mostly white and considered mostly rural. It still is. A few Black families lived in our small city and had for many generations. It was thought widely that our town, while not racially diverse, was at least welcoming to persons of color. I knew the Black families and their children, went to public school with them, played with them in the neighborhood, and played sports with them through high school. But I have no doubt that they experienced racism there in ways that were and are unimaginable and horrible and, sadly, typical.

In addition to preaching, seeing parishioners in their homes, teaching confirmation classes, and visiting the sick in area hospitals, Dad served on pastoral committees and traveled widely in the region, and sometimes pastors would come from out of town to our church and home for meetings. They might even come to the parsonage where we lived for 16 years and pass through for coffee and a smoke (most pastors smoked in that era) before meeting formally in the church or at a community site. This was one of those occasions.

One Saturday morning, I was watching cartoons by myself (rare, with three siblings usually fighting constantly for TV rights) in the family room, and a group of about five pastors, white men with one Black woman, came through the front door of the house just off the family room, laughing and talking loudly. The men followed Dad into the kitchen for coffee, but the woman peeled off after seeing me sitting on the floor.

She came into the room and said, "Hello, young man, what's your name?"

"I'm Tom. Who are you?"

She said, "I'm Barbara. I'm here for a meeting with your Dad. What are you watching?"

"Bugs Bunny."

"Oh, I love Bugs. Do you mind if I join you?"

"No," and I scrambled off the floor and onto the couch next to her where she sat down.

We watched a few minutes of the show together, but I also looked up at her, and we talked about the show. And she laughed. I recall how beautiful she was. I knew Black women from town and had seen several on TV, like Denise Nicholas on *Room 222* and Diahann Carroll in *Julia*, but my new friend was even more beautiful, I thought. And she was kind and funny and, I remember, so at ease.

At ease. Kind. Friendly. Beautiful. Funny.

At ease, there in that place.

She had put her arm around me as we watched the show and laughed.

Then all of the men emerged from the kitchen, including my Dad, and called Barbara to come along for the meeting.

The episode was over in a flash.

She said, "Good-bye, Tom, thanks for letting me watch Bugs with you," as she patted me on the knee and smiled.

I said, "Good-bye, Barbara."

And I watched her go.

I never saw her again, except for every day for the rest of my life.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 2: RACIAL CONFLAGRATION (OR RACIST FIRE RAGING EVERYWHERE WITHOUT ANY "VISIBLE" FLAMES)

Fiery.

Most people would describe us both that way: Dan, Black, 5'7", point guard, a freshman, and Tom, white, 5'7", point guard, a sophomore.

We both were trying out for the college basketball team for the first time. I had focused on academics and baseball as a freshman at our small college and did well, making the dean's list and the starting nine games that first year at second base and as leadoff hitter. I didn't play basketball my first year because I had been so disappointed during my senior year in high school by the lack of interest in me by colleges and coaches. I decided at that time that I would focus in college on my best sport, baseball, and that would be enough. But the head basketball coach at the college, who expected me to play my first year after showing real interest in me as a player and student, stayed after a varsity practice to see me play in an intramural game one night; I made at least 10 shots in a row from way outside right in front of him. We both knew I should be playing basketball, especially after that flurry even against weak competition, and he continually invited me to come out for the team as a sophomore. I realized that I couldn't get basketball out of my system without trying.

Dan came to college highly touted, having played on a team that made the state high school tournament's final four. He was very good—fast, strong, skilled, but not as good a shooter or passer as me. That's a fact that would bear out in time. In addition, Dan was funny and well-liked. He had a great high school basketball career, like all the rest of us, and he never stopped thinking or believing for one minute, just like I did, that he was better than all the rest of the guards in the pre-season camp.

But the overall outlook and situation was grim for both Dan and me, realistically. Four guards had made the team by default because they already owned letter jackets. All four of them were future all-league selections, highly recruited themselves, with game experience, strength, great endurance, size, speed, skill, and athleticism, and they were only getting better at every practice. They clearly occupied the top of the team's depth chart at guard. All of us, including Dan and I, and at least six other grown men, new recruits with dreams, would be in pre-season workouts and practices together under the head coach's microscope nearly every second, competing just to make the team, let alone to have a shot at any varsity playing time that season.

And Dan and I found ourselves pitted against each other in nearly every scrimmage, in nearly every drill in pre-season workouts. After a few weeks, we really started to get on each other's nerves. After one hard foul after another, the blows mutually exchanged in one long, tight game in a five-on-five scrimmage to 11 baskets, I finally snapped, "You know, Dan, you're nothing but an asshole." I know I shouldn't have said it, then and now, no matter, especially loud enough for everyone to hear. He immediately came at me, of course, and our teammates broke up the scuffle very quickly. Cooler heads prevailed, and things settled down between us over the next weeks and months after we realized that we were trying to make the same team. But as we made our way through the final cuts, both of us surviving and making the 18-person roster, we grew even more distant, competitive, eager to subdue the other.

At the same time, I went to classes and worked in my residence hall as an RA in the same building where Dan lived in on a different floor. Dan's RAs wrote him up constantly, and he abused them verbally and threatened them. He said they were racists and didn't enforce the rules fairly on the floor. They complained in meetings about Dan and said none of what he said about them was true. I believed the RAs, my friends, both of them white. Dan piled up the infractions until one night when I was on all-floor support duty (all of the RAs took one night every couple of weeks to be actively available to lend support for any situation in the hall), Dan's RAs called me up to their floor to help out with a situation with him. They were having trouble getting him to close his door with his music on, one of the hall's rules, and I showed up to help. When I entered Dan's hallway, someone shut his door from the inside, and the music went off. I went to the door and knocked. Dan opened the door.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Your RAs called me, I'm on duty tonight, and they said you had the music on loud with your door open."

"You just knocked on it."

"Yeah, but I saw you shut it when I opened the hall door."

"That's total bullshit."

"Maybe, but the RAs on your floor are fed up, and they are going to write it up."

"So?"

"I'm just sayin'."

"Okay, whatever." And Dan shut the door in my face, hard.

The RAs filled out the loud music/open door violation form, which proved to be the final straw that broke the camel's back. The office of residence life held a hearing with all of the piled up infractions, some not so serious like the music one, some more so. I was called as the last witness to the hearing, since I had signed the report as the RA on duty that night. I entered the room. Dan was not subdued, but more agitated than ever, mad.

"What happened the night of this last write up, Tom?" the assistant dean asked.

"Well, I went into the hallway after the RAs called me while I was on all-floor duty, and when I entered the hall the door was open, and the music was playing loud. I went in and told Dan at the door that I would support the write up confirming the noise violation."

"That's a lie," Dan said, "Tom knocked on my door, and the music was off."

I just sat there after rolling my eyes, looking at neither one of them. I didn't care. I just wanted the charges and whatever punishment would follow to stick. After an awkward silence, the dean dismissed me.

"Thanks, Tom, that's all."

As I walked out the office door, I realized that I had lied and that I had to make it right, no matter the consequences. I didn't think I could live with myself if I didn't say something.

I turned around, sat back down, and said, "Dan's right, I saw the door close and heard the music go off when I entered the hallway. The door was shut, not open when I knocked on it. So, I did lie just now about the door being open when I knocked on it."

"Liar!" Dan pointed at me and screamed at the dean, "I told you, I can't even get a fair hearing over all of these minor infractions without people lying!"

"Dan's right," I said, and walked out.

I didn't feel any better. I felt worse. I realized that every single thing was wrong with me and the world.

Nothing ever happened to me after that in terms of consequences. The dean never called me in, never questioned me, nothing. The school finally kicked Dan out of the hall the next semester and provided off-campus housing to finish up the year. A year later, the deans made a liar the head resident of an entire hall.

Dan and I played together the entire rest of that season and fought hard the next season against each other for many months to "earn" the small nuggets of playing time on the college's best team in history. I won out in the end. But we never, ever spoke one word to each other after I lied. Not one word.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 3: BUT I DIDN'T KNOW...DOES THAT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE?

We moved to the location of our current family home two years ago to make my wife's work commute more manageable, 20 minutes instead of an hour in the car each way. During the pandemic, one saving grace has been the presence of good takeout food options in our area. But my wife and family would also be quick to add that our pickup

orders are literally never correct. The order is wrong every single time, and we are just amazed at the odds of that—even given the paucity of workers, the stress of the volume of the work, the absolute difficulty of the work, and how low paid it is, etc. Of course, some orders are going to be wrong. But every one? The whole thing is a mess, and we are right in the middle of it. But how can that be? Are we the only ones? Are we doing something wrong when we order?

To combat our negative batting average on incorrect orders at pick up, we began in stops and starts to check the orders before leaving, every item, and there can sometimes be up to 10 items in sealed containers, not always easy to manipulate in the car, and the food gets colder when we check everything, and we just hate that part of it. There's also almost a reverse mental angle happening now where we are like, "We are not checking it. It can't possibly be wrong again after we have come all this way!" Of course, if anything does go wrong with the order, it's my fault, and I am the one who has to drive all the way back to make it right.

We know that we are complaining from a position of privilege. We have the money for food, the means to order and pick it up, and to have leftovers the next day. But who we are doesn't change the fact that we worked all day and are hungry and will pay for it, even at a premium price. Or does it?

Recently we placed an order from one of the newer places that we like; they made a mistake on the order by leaving out an entire entrée. When we unpacked the food, it was my dish that was missing, and the others grabbed their food and just sat down and started eating. I didn't expect them to wait, though I was still a little peeved that my own people didn't seem to care about the inconvenience. It would be another half hour if I left at that moment before I got back with the right items. I had already spent a half hour in the car to get the botched order!

I called the store on my way out just to make sure they got it right this time...

"Hi, this is Tom, I just picked up an order, and an entire entrée was missing. We only had three items. It's hard to imagine getting the order wrong. I don't suppose you can deliver it to the house to make this right?" I had already started the car and was pulling out of the garage because I knew the answer.

"No, sir, we can't do that without charging you a fee, and it will take at least an hour."

"Right, okay, well then, I'm on my way, I'm about 15 minutes out, and I've already spent a half hour in the car. Please put the manager on the line so we can get this right."

Wait... Wait... Wait...

"Hello, this is Pat, the manager, just come in the store, and we'll make the order right for you. And be sure to bring in the receipt."

"No. I'm not coming in the store," I said brusquely. "I know that you bring orders out to cars all the time, and we come in to pick up as a convenience to you. I'd like for you to get the missing order right and complete and bring it out to the car. And I don't have the receipt. It's with the other bags, and I'm already on my way. I can't go back home again without the order."

"But sir, we need the receipt to make the order."

"I know that's not true," now more slightly miffed. "I was just there to pick up the incomplete order. My name is Tom. The order is in your system. I saw it on the computer screen. I'll be there in 15 minutes. Please have it ready."

I hung up.

When I got to the store, I called, said I was there, and identified my car. The manager walked out to the car, masked, as was I, and when she got to the door, I reached out my hand and said to the young Black woman, smiling (unseen), "Thanks so much for getting the order right for us." She held the food back. "Sir, I'll need the other food back that we made for you." "What do you mean, the other food? It's being eaten at home by my family while I waste another half hour in the car making up for your staff's mistake." "But I made the entire order over again like you said to do while you were yelling at me on the phone." "I certainly never yelled," but I think I'm yelling now. But that really stung. I never yelled. Did I yell? "I merely said to make the missing order, the missing dishes that were left out the first time." "Well, I made the entire order over again, not just those items, but all of them," she said, and then she started crying. I said, moved, very sad myself, so many casualties, a completely lost cause in every way, "I literally said from the beginning that I was only coming back for what was missing. I would never expect you to make the whole order again, just what we paid for that wasn't provided. I can't drive away without the food. I still don't have all the food that I paid for. And by the way, I wasn't yelling. And your staff made the food wrong, and I drove all the way back for it. I will have spent an hour in the car now for this order." She said, crying, "You're yelling again." "I am not yelling. Please hand me the food."

She handed me the bag. I drove off. Sickened. It all went down the drain.

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT 4: MOVE!

I like to go to Walmart. When I'm confined to home so much, getting out for even a short trip makes me happy. I like seeing other people, watching them make their way in the world. And the staff is generally good natured and kind. There are so many different types of people in our local store, of all races and nationalities, speaking different languages, trying to make their way in this upside-down world. It's good to see them out and about.

I had just a couple of grocery items to get, picked them up, looked to see if there were any baseball cards for sale in the checkout aisle, and picked up a sandwich in the Subway store just inside the front door.

As I exited, I felt really happy. I was just carrying a small bag and a sandwich. I had looked at the greeter on my right to show my receipt, and she waved me through. I nodded and smiled behind my mask. I had no expectations that anyone would be coming in the exit when I turned back to look at my next steps out of the store.

Just two steps away from me, surprisingly, straight ahead and entering quickly and with purpose, with a really good head of steam, was a tall Black woman wearing big blue plastic eyeglasses, like really big, fashionable ones, though with a borderline Elton John style. She was wearing a one-piece blue pant suit that matched the glasses and blue high heeled shoes. Amazing how much you can remember about an instant.

It happened so fast.

She said, "Move!" and brushed me out of the way to the wall with her arm, not touching me. I basically fell into the wall, without losing my footing, to avoid her; I just

could not risk running into her. I would have been in the wrong, no matter the directional exit/entrance issue, and she was at least 6' tall to my 5'7". I was no match.

I looked back at her and at the greeter, herself a Black woman, who, amazed, watched the woman walk into the produce area. The greeter looked back at me, I gathered myself, and I turned and walked out.

When I think of it, I think of the suddenness and the wonder of it all, of how so many disparate things can come together at once and nearly collide but also not meet, at least literally.

I will never forget the disdain for me that she communicated in the way she said "Move!" with such authority, and clarity, and with a dismissive quality that reduced me to a mere obstacle. What an effect she had. She flew right by me and into the store and on with her life, confidently navigating the world, flying fast and free and unfettered, no matter the boundaries or barriers. Freedom.

I am no victim. I smile. I realize—I am the thicket.

CURRICULUM ANALYSIS

I have been sitting on the first two curriculum fragments for decades, and the last two fragments occurred the past few months amid rising racial tension and strife along with the persistent and very dangerous 2020 pandemic, which as we know has been most cruel to people of color. The strain all around has been palpable. If you don't feel it now or haven't felt it at all, somehow you aren't in it or aren't aware of it or your own complicity in constituting the thicket. It's time to awaken. I had known for a while that I had to write these stories down, to more clearly see myself and others; it is time.

After the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, Chad Sanders wrote a definitive opinion piece for the *New York Times* on June 5, 2020, entitled, "I Don't Need 'Love' Texts from my White Friends: I Need Them to Fight Anti-Blackness." So I stopped doing to my own friends what Mr. Sanders' friends were doing to him. I took his advice of trying to find in my life and work ways to fight anti-Blackness and not wallow in my own guilt and need for forgiveness from people who were battling deep injustices and despair every day on a level way beyond anything I ever could or would experience. I'm not sure that the fragments from my life about participating in and watching racism as it played out in experience do the work of ameliorating anti-Blackness, but as my colleague and friend Denise Baszile taught me, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." Perhaps no matter the consequences, I wrote them down and associate them with loving. To be even clearer, I don't expect anything but criticism for writing them. I especially anticipate your skepticism that they have anything to do with the life process, the curriculum, of loving. I am not looking for nor do I deserve anyone's forgiveness for the past rights or wrongs I depicted here or for what I'm about to say. However, I do want the curriculum fragments and my analysis of them to be thought about from perspectives oriented toward the process of loving. To make any more headway than the stories themselves may make for me/us, it's important to frame them continually, at least from my point of view, with educative intentions connected to love.

I realize now that my image of beautiful Black women was shaped by images of them that the white mass communication structure felt as though it could forward on primetime broadcast network TV in late 1960s America. But no matter my prejudices, or how the world was reading Blackness to me at that time—and I realize that the structures in place were teaching me to be anti-Black in subtle and not so subtle ways—I would contend that Barbara was a beautiful person and still is in my mind's eye, mainly for the

kindness she showed to me—how genuine and warm and caring, and, in a word, loving she was in that moment. I like to imagine that she served her entire career as a pastor in this way, nurturing and caring for others no matter what they looked like, what they did, where they came from, unconditionally.

I can say for sure that I had no tangible sense of anti-Blackness in me at seven years old and that my encounter with her certainly put me more at ease around people of color for the rest of my life and confirmed the self-love and worth she captured in me by sharing her love and care in that agapic moment on a granular level. Maybe that is thin, not substantive. But it's true from my perspective. Just maybe she thought in the moment that she could connect with a little white boy who might grow up without being filled with hate and maybe turn out to be at least as good as his father was in that regard. Maybe in a moment the world can shift, move, love, no matter how shaky that vision of possibility turns out to be in real life, in practice.

And that perspective, of how life events, even the seemingly tiniest of them, while not the same or maybe even not parallel, collides with Baszile's (2016) stunning, poignant depiction of "spirit murder" in her mostly fictive *currere* work "Gettin' on with the Business of the Rest of Her Life: On the Curriculum of Her Blackness." Baszile's work is a progressive *currere* project in which she imagines a "fictive" character who has been damaged by a teacher's past demeaning acts, whose very spirit, soul, has been murdered by the discipline of schooling, and I believe we are to infer that the discipline, perhaps the entire enterprise of the white educational superstructure, is bound up in racism. There are two aspects of Baszile's story that are germane to my stories and the topic of a curriculum of loving—the need for love in education and in every aspect of human life and the position that love can be spurred, expressed, and even lasting in significant ways as encapsulated in a mere, yet powerful, moment of action.

The first aspect is that Baszile's (2016) character in the story wonders about the total impact of spirit murder, the kind experienced in her memory of being disciplined by her second-grade teacher, as she listened or not to the voice constantly ringing in the back of her head. It happened when the teacher

made her stand in the garbage can in the corner for talking too loud in class, and she definitely didn't listen to the voice that told her, "You ain't nobody's trash!" And though she would have never admitted it, probably be ashamed to, that hurt grew up like a poisonous vine all around her soul until it killed her dead over and over again. (p. 12)

While the spirit murder is critical, important, and central, as it has to be, the deeper issue here has to do with our response. Baszile's character, the one scarred, continues:

But I just keep wondering even if we made a law that says you can't make kids stand in a garbage can for talking too loud in class, it might not do any good. What if it's not the law in the government but the hurt in the teacher who would just find some other way to take it out on us. Maybe she would just hit us, or hang us over the window ledge, or worst of all just slice us up with her words, the ones spewing out of her mouth like vomit or the ones hiding behind her squinting eyes. And besides if it did any good, it would be for all those kids coming after us, but it would do nothing for her whose hurt grew up like a poisonous vine. And if we still have a lot of her running around all broken up how does that impact the rest of us? I'm just saying. (p. 13)

What I hear Baszile saying is that one person can make a difference, perhaps turn things. The tumbling disaster of our lives together is that we don't take any care or responsibility for how we are hurting each other, maybe even when it's pointed out to us. In our denial, we rebuff the love that is possible, that could come about by not repeating bad acts, in building ways forward that value others instead of demean them, that focus on growth and not the socialization toward traditional discipline that marshals only punishment—and usually only in racist ways for racist reasons—and ultimately in ways that foreground forgiveness and love of self as well as love of others.

The second aspect, the notion of self-love, serves as the catalyst that drives our love of others. We can't have one without the other. To develop a sense of well-being for self that doesn't highly depend upon loving and valuing others leads to insulation, maybe even hate, the worst form of action that comes from isolation and alienation, which can result without the necessary connection between self and others socially and culturally in ways that build connections and possibility. Instead, Baszile (2016) says,

It is love of self that extends to love of others, that provides a foundation for the kind of the agency that will change systems, institutions, policies and *people*. We have failed to consider love as central rather than tangential or simply as the domain of mothers, fathers, and lovers. (p. 14, emphasis in the original)

The allegory of the thicket, then, is representative of the tangles that we negotiate and navigate and sometimes get caught in and suggests that to fly free, full of love and the act of sharing it, we have to be able to move, carefully, purposefully, and recklessly—all at the same time—toward a more radical sense of ourselves as creatures of agency, action, and meaning. Everything we do matters, committing to sharing ourselves matters, and the world matters when we take stock of and nurture the tiniest moments during the encounters amid the greatest set of obstacles, the thickets that we encounter, that could bring us down, and, perhaps in a lifetime, free us on the other side to soar.

Now back to the ground. Dan and I haven't spoken in 35 years. I don't know if he is still alive. I do care if he is, I hope he is, and I wish him well, and I regret everything that happened and didn't happen between us. In fact, at the time, what didn't happen between us on any sustained level brings me the most sadness—the fact of our mutual lost potential and friendship and understanding that could have happened if we ever really permitted ourselves to be on the same side, to share common ground. At the same time that I am filled with regret over the entire incident from start to finish, I remember very fondly the rare moments when we were playing *together* and not *against* each other, times when I was able to imagine and actually see in practice that we would have made a great combination in the game we both loved, basketball.

The fact of the matter is typically only one player of our small size could be covered for by the others on defense in a college game. But occasionally during that first season in JV games ahead of the varsity contests and in our few precious moments of varsity playing time, we wound up on the court together, even after the closed-door incident in the residence hall and the fallout during the hearing. We played so well together during one stretch of one game after the incident that our work resulted in a winning comeback for our side that was sparked by a flurry of steals and passes to each other for baskets that turned the game. We ran off the court when the distressed opponent called timeout, and we high fived each other and sat in the huddle side-by-side getting ready to put the touches on a great win. I remember Dan smiling at me in the huddle,

which I'll never forget and always cherish and appreciate, and I smiled back. I never saw that coming. We never spoke, but I think we figured out one place in the world where we could be together, fulfilled, at peace, almost flying, if not fully embracing any long-term resolution. We had that moment, but it didn't really reframe the equation. Our lives required more long term, continuous examination of all that stood between us and the rigorous trial of working through our differences. We never did that. But in that moment...

What Dan and I may have had together is something Wang (2020) surfaces in her work in melding Chinese philosophical thought with *currere*: that is the experience of "pure knowing" or the experience of "innate knowledge" or "intuitive moral knowledge" (p. 82). And that came in those few moments on the court when we could do no wrong, communicated on a different level, and won together. Those moments still constitute some of the most fulfilling of my college sports career and my curriculum journey of becoming a more complete human being. Wang (2020) suggests that experiences of this sort might constitute a case of "pure knowing," signifying a return to the "pre-conceptual" (p. 83), which according to Pinar et al. (1995) constitutes an aspect of *currere* and its phenomenological roots:

Unlike mainstream educational research which focuses upon the end products of the processes of consciousness as described by Husserl, those end products we call concepts, abstractions, conclusions, and generalizations we, in accumulative fashion, call knowledge, *currere* seeks to slide underneath these end products and structures to the preconceptual experience that is their foundation. (p. 415)

I love the brilliant imagery of "slide underneath" and think of Dan and me flying through a thicket of opponents, in one moment in time, in one game, side-by-side, where we could be as complete as we could be. Perhaps Dan and I for a moment slid under the alienation, mistrust, and anger we felt toward one another and reached some other destination. Wang (2020) goes on to describe this further, saying:

Pure knowing is, then, not scientific knowledge or comprehension and application of external ethical rules, but rather every person's clear awareness of morals, especially through the emotion of approval and disapproval (Lu, 2014). It is moral awareness, and it arises naturally. ... The emotion of love is the manifestation of pure knowing as the highest good. (p. 83)

The fact that we had these moments may constitute a form of love, but none of it excuses every ill and hurt and violence that Dan experienced and that I helped inflict. However, it perhaps constitutes a hopeful opening, maybe a place to look for room to maneuver, to make something out of seemingly nothing. I suppose that's what love does in the first place, pre-conceptually, at root. If that's who we are as human beings, then we have to build from these moments so everything we interact with, on all levels, has the emotional wherewithal to value and pursue love and not hate.

And finally, both of the young Black women I interacted with recently, so briefly, but in some ways deeply, especially when our experiences together caused tears to flow that were not my own (until later), feel the most distant to me from love. Certainly, the restaurant manager doesn't love me now, and the woman in blue who nearly knocked me over wouldn't and couldn't remember me in a million years. I am

just some little, old white guy in the way. But in many ways, though almost literally a disposable obstacle, like a pylon, I'm just as big and as scary and as ominous as ever, with power.

It is true that I create a substantial set of obstacles because of my existence, not just in terms of entering the thicket of a Walmart through the exit and somehow getting through the store having found what was needed, or in terms of completing a day where customer after customer yells and complains while you simply try to keep a business afloat with too few customers, unreliable employees, and uncertain health and welfare concerns at work, home, and school. Every moment itself, as we have learned this year in our strained lives, is potentially filled with peril, especially in terms of a higher sense of and actual influence of racist actions and policies and institutions. I think this is turning out to be more so and more evident than it ever has been, though colleagues and students have pointed out that ever it was and ever it shall be for those living outside the white power bubble. But I think we are at a crucial point, where the world is turning as it must, though these moments of flight have also always been particularly frightening for people of color in ways that exponentially surpass anything I will ever experience. And people of color have to navigate, move, risk, and tangle themselves in the world in ways that I don't have to.

Grumet (1988) attacks the notion of the *concept* itself—the ideal, an end in sight that we can set and clarify—as freeing, because the ideal, like the American dream, or safety, or clarity of objectives in the curriculum *abandons intimacy for anonymity*. It *privileges notions of public ends over family concerns and a common culture over the particular cultural lives we live locally*. If we are constantly moving toward the common and think that a common culture will yield a more perfect democratic nation or any notion idealized and worth pursuing, we are mistaken. Grumet (1988) writes, “What is common is never how we live or what we share. What is common is the ideal, the dream that manages to elude us all” (p. 171).

Instead, while I can't go back in time, I can live differently now. I can create fewer barriers, even in places where the interactions are mostly transactional (Buber, 1996) and live purposefully through communication and action toward more a substantive relationality with others. I can be less hungry, upset, and harried. I can be kinder, more helpful, more loving. I can see other people, where they are coming from, what they are experiencing, and value them. And I can make way for them when they are traveling at high speed and get out of the way without resignation. I can be a better human being, granularly.

In the end, though, the key is translating the world beyond my/our thicket, to become more than an obstacle, but a clearer of obstacles or at least a bridge to the other side when power closes down the openings ahead. How can I help create a thicket (it can't be cleared, I'm afraid, what would we do about the ozone layer then after razing the thicket? See how metaphors break down in time?) with enough room in it for all of us to pass through in ways that help us soar? I must dismantle, with awareness, all of the rules and norms and traditions that bond me with others but separate me, too, and figure out some way to connect, attach, facilitate, value, understand all those I see and teach. And love.

Perhaps Berman (1968) said it best in her book and her section on the process of loving:

Love is essentially a mode of cognition. Love is concerned neither with feeling good nor feeling bad. Love is concerned with understanding. Love listens to hear.

Love is a state of complete attention, without intruding thoughts and motivations. Contrary to general belief, love is not just a feeling or emotion. The opposite of love is not hate, as is generally assumed. *The opposite of love is calculative thinking.* (p. 68, emphasis in the original)

Perhaps the barriers we create to loving, embodied in our thicket, truly manifest, ultimately, in how we strategize, incentivize, and implement power through our separation from, our distance from, and our fear of each other. Can we do something different from all of this?

Can we love?

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