On Campus

Learning a Pedagogy of Love

By
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The day I arrived at Columbia was a memorable one, and I can still recall it vividly. It was a warm August afternoon, the kind of day when the campus is brimming with life. Students were taking advantage of the break in the academic calendar, many of them clad in swimwear and sprawled out on blankets. Children were running up and down, transforming College Walk into a playground. I even remember a young woman whom I took to be a harried graduate student. You know the look. She emerged from the shadows of Butler Library, with a heavy satchel tipping her to one side, her left arm loaded with books.

I had ridden the subway up from the Lower East Side, having escaped for the afternoon from my hectic law practice. By the time I arrived at 116th Street, I felt, as I often did in those days, bone tired. That summer I was marking my tenth year in the field of public-interest law. My work as an advocate for people with mental illness and people with HIV and AIDS required that I spend my days litigating cases in some of the City's grittiest courthouses. I believed I was fighting the good fight—saving a client's home or helping a dying mother plan for her children's future. Day in and day out, the *fight* was what had given my life deep meaning. But on that day I was walking away from all that, and into the world of the University. As I stepped out in front of Low Library from the shade of the linden trees that usher you onto campus, I took in the scene, inhaled deeply, and knew something momentous was about to begin.

I had as much trepidation as I did anything else. I steeled myself as I climbed the steps of Low Library, silently invoking some of those who had walked the same path before me. There was my paternal grandfather, David Dallas Jones, who had come to Columbia as a young man to do his graduate work. There was my mother, Suzanne Y. Jones, a member of the inaugural cohort of Charles H. Revson Fellows on the

Future of New York, who had studied here in 1979 and 1980 while caring for three high-spirited teenagers. As I imagined the journeys of graduates past, my mind turned to the experience of Thomas Merton, the poet, philosopher, and Trappist monk who had attended Columbia in the 1930s. Earlier that summer I had read his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In it Merton recounts how he had arrived in Morningside Heights as a young man who was somewhat adrift. By the time he left the University, he had discovered his spirituality (he was converted to Roman Catholicism at Corpus Christi Church on 121st Street), constructed an intellectual life, and filled his world with lasting friendships and an enduring sense of community. Merton's years at Columbia had been transformative, giving his life both a vocation and deep meaning.

When he later reflected on his time here, Merton wrote: "The thing I always liked best about Columbia was the sense that the University was, on the whole, glad to turn me loose in its library, its classrooms, and among its distinguished faculty, and let me make what I liked out of it all." But Merton knew that to be "turned loose" was a double-edged sword. At Columbia there are no easy answers for graduate students, no prescribed paths, and very little handholding. Each of us is left to make his or her own meanings out of the experience.

Merton was also mindful that, as he put it, "the least of the work of learning is done in classrooms." It was frequently in informal, often unplanned spaces that our moments of greatest insight came into being—in a diner sipping a bottomless cup of coffee, in a meeting planning a student event, or during a chance encounter in the library; during a conversation that extended long after a professor's office hours had expired, or in the early hours of the evening when things in the lab had quieted down. In these encounters that are not accounted for by residence units or credit hours, in these "scores of incidents, remarks, and happenings, that took place all over the campus and sometimes far from it, " we experienced what Merton explained were for him "small bursts of light that pointed out his way in the dark" of his own identity.

Often what we ultimately take away from an experience such as graduate school is something that, at the outset, we did not even know we wanted or needed. This was certainly true for Merton, who could not have imagined that what awaited him on the other side of his studies was a lifetime of cloistered contemplation; he had aspired to be a writer of popular novels. And this has also been true for me. I arrived at Columbia seeking a historian's training, but I discovered my core, my essence, my

insight, and it was about love. Now, back on that August afternoon when I first climbed the Low Library steps, you could not have told me that love was either what I wanted or what I needed. But I would have admitted to a type of longing that I think Merton also felt—a longing to find a new ethic, a philosophy of life, an essence that would better equip me for all that might lie ahead. And today I can confess that the most enduring facets of my Columbia experience have been the opportunities I have had to get and give love, and to begin to see its transformative power at work in my life, in all of our lives.

The question that I want to ask you all to consider today is to what extent can our lives in a university community—as teachers, scholars, colleagues and public figures—be lived through an ethic of love? Merton is instructive here because his vantage point as a cloistered thinker reminds us that love is far more than romantic happenstance. It is instead the highest expression of our humanity. He wrote: “Love is in fact an intensification of life, a completeness, a fullness, a wholeness of life. We do not live merely in order to vegetate through our days until we die. Nor do we live merely in order to take part in the routines of work and amusement that go on around us. . . . Life is not a straight horizontal line between two points, birth and death. Life reaches its high point of value and meaning when . . . the person transcends himself or herself in . . . communion with another. It is for this that we came into the world—this communion and self-transcendence. We do not become fully human until we give ourselves to each other in love.”

Surely few of us chose doctoral study during the 1990s, of all times, because it was the ordinary or the obvious choice. We have all been asked to defend this decision—perhaps by a family member who believed we could be equally happy following a more “practical” path or at social gatherings, with the question, “But what are you going to do with that?” I suspect that the majority of us chose doctoral study because we were driven, we were drawn, we were called to do that which we loved, and to do it well, even in the face of our loved ones’ gentle skepticism. We are among the very people whom Merton had in mind when he imagined those most capable of love. We already know that life is not a straight path, because we have stumbled and struggled to come to this moment. And we know that life is not lived only in the realm of the routine, that, in its fullest, life is lived in those extraordinary moments when we come together—as teachers and learners, as thinkers and doers—to become more than we might ever be alone.

Many of us look forward to becoming teachers in our everyday lives—in classrooms and in labs, in public culture and in communities. Educator Paolo Freire insists that a good teacher must include lovingness in his or her arsenal, and Freire would agree with Merton, I think, that an ethic of communion and self-transcendence can permit us, as teachers and students together, to accomplish radical objectives. But Freire goes further, urging us to adopt what he terms “armed love.” For him, the challenge for the teacher, who is also a learner, is to be both joyful and rigorous . . . to be serious, scientific, physical, and emotional. It is, he argues, impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. It is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love.

Freire’s urgency is fueled, in part, by his deep interest in seeing that students experience the best learning possible, and for him love is essential to this end. But he is as deeply concerned with our survival, as teachers, in environments that are sometimes hostile, always demanding, and that invariably ask us to commit 100 percent, even as we are being continually subjected to the scrutiny of the tenure track. This can be a debilitating existence, and many of us have already witnessed those among us who bemoan their lot in the life of the academy, working tirelessly while never certain that promotion to tenure is within reach. If we recall Merton’s admonition, it should be no surprise that such a narrow drive toward tenure is demoralizing. Life is not lived in a straight path between two points—birth and death—or, for us—between landing a faculty appointment and being awarded tenure. Life’s meanings, its deep meanings, will not come in the routine pursuit of such an end. They will come instead in those extraordinary moments when we encounter, respond to, and work in communion with others.

How might we carry this ideal of love from the realm of the abstract into our lived experience? Legal scholar Derrick Bell offers the notion of “ethical ambition” in an effort to help us imagine how to put love into action. In his recent reflections on his career in the academy, Bell locates a space in which integrity and ambition might coexist—not to produce dissonance, but to manufacture a unique type of success that respects our core values and ethical convictions. For Bell, this means respecting our passions, mustering the courage to take risks, having the humility to see our mistakes, and relying on family, friends, and colleagues for the resources to weather difficult times. Bell’s vision requires, above all else, that we challenge ourselves to be uncompromising, but not about the vagaries of any given moment. Instead, we

must be uncompromising in our commitment to our own ethical view, and we must have the courage to speak that conviction and invite others to join us in it.

In my life it was my own grandmother, Susie Williams Jones, who put the fine point on my worldview. Having spent her adult life living and working on the campus of a small historically black college, she, too, offered an approach to daily life that was guided by an intimate sense of the ethical. She wrote: “It has always seemed important to me to give all I have to the things at hand—that the daily routines and the small happenings by the way are not means or paths to great undertakings, but are ends within themselves. Serving a meal, making a bed, bathing a child, preparing a paper for a club meeting, visiting a friend—daily routines have helped me to find myself.” Rather than shunning the ordinary, we might embrace the routines of daily life with an ethic of self-transcendence that will allow us to realize our fullest humanity.

This challenge requires that we contemplate not only our relationships with students, but also our relationships with peers—in faculty meetings and through committee assignments, in conferences and through writing groups, in the University Senate and through peer review. What would it mean, as we traverse these spaces, to replace an ethic of cynicism, a narrative of overwhelmedness, or a worldview of petty competition, with a spirit of communion and self-transcendence? As I implore you to do, I challenge myself to strive for the greatest meaning in a culture that already offers us so many opportunities to know love.

When I returned to College Walk this week, it had been nearly nine months since I was at Columbia. I found myself sometimes alone, at other times with a friend, wandering from building to building, office to office, greeting many of the people who worked so hard to make our accomplishments possible. These days I take my daily walk in another place, at the University of Michigan, on what we call “The Diag.” There I am steeled, not through the invocation of those who walked there before me, but by my own experience, and by the relationships I forged at Columbia. Every moment of communion and self-transcendence, every moment of love, both given and received, has strengthened and emboldened me. I take those moments with me, and I strive to replicate them again and again. This is why I get up in the morning, and it is what I bring to my classroom and even the most challenging of faculty meetings. This is why I stand before you this afternoon. This is how I make meaning out of my life. I leave here with so very much more than I ever hoped for—I have learned the pedagogy of love.

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