

Chapter 22

Change From Within: A Journey of Seeking Transformational Wisdom

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ABSTRACT

The author reflects on her own journey through academia and the moments in which change has and has not happened throughout her time as a doctoral student to understand what foundations are needed for transformational change in society and the implications of these implications on academia. Though this process of reflection, the author argues that the bedrock of societal transformation is change that begins within and through experience. These experiences allow for the individual to embody the radical ideas needed within their bodies and selves. The chapter ends with the argument that only when such transformation is internalized and becomes part of one's own identity can there be change in society more broadly.

JEROME

Of all my students, the one I remember best is Jerome (pseudonym). He was one of the 20 beautiful students in my second year of teaching. Many of these students had troubles that seemed beyond what I felt equipped to help them with, especially since I had lived a life of middle-class comfort, but Jerome stood out from the very first day. We were going around the room saying our names and an animal that began with the same letter as our name. Each person then had to say the names of all the people who came before. Most of my students were rather pleased with the game, helping each other out with remembering a classmate's name if they faltered and especially eager to remind classmates of their own names. When we got to Jerome his eyes told me that he did not want to be in this classroom or to play this game. Unbidden, the thought that came to me was *he's going to be a handful*. My second thought was *I will love him especially*.

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Change From Within

And so the year began. The school district was located in a small rural town in the Midwest where most students were low-income or English Language Learners. The district as a whole had been underperforming for several years and struggling to meet the needs of its student population. Most students' parents were from working class backgrounds and worked multiple jobs. I tried to make the classroom a safe and loving space for them but I felt inadequate and unsure that I understood my students' life experiences. Still, I learned how to see potential in each student, even when the student did his or her best to bury that potential because of pain, doubt, and fear of trying (and succeeding). I felt that if nothing else, love would be what I gave them.

This was what let me sit calmly while Jerome told me repeatedly one day "I hate you; I hate you; I hate you" and respond only with "You can hate me if you want but I still love you." He heard me that day in a way that he had not heard me for the half year we had known each other. We had spent months in a dance, with him trying to push the boundaries as much as he could, distrustful that the support would continue or perhaps trying to intentionally break it since that seemed to be familiar to him. This is not to say he was deliberate in disturbing his classmates, the lesson, or myself. His behavior seemed to be a natural reaction at this point; natural because he had been doing it for so long. Jerome was raised by a single mother who worked two jobs and was both unwilling to consider the possibility that her son might need extra help and unable to navigate the process of getting him the help he needed. He was older than my other students since he had repeated first grade. Because of his mother's limited involvement, most of my understanding of Jerome's life came from the interactions we had in the classroom, and it was here that I and my fellow third grade colleagues worked together to help him.

I felt the difference in the classroom on days when he was gone— a lightness and ease seemed to emanate from the students on those days as though some kind of tension or fear had been released. He was easily the oldest child in the room, both in age and in the worldly knowledge he possessed (he clearly had watched movies and played video games not meant for his age). Yet, when Jerome was hospitalized for a week in a children's psychiatric hospital after saying he would kill himself, the other students rushed to make get well cards for him and wish him well. Even those who he bullied the most wrote heartfelt messages of support and expressed appreciation for him, their messages surrounded by drawings of flowers and rainbows. Their sincerity pulled at my heartstrings as much as the thought of a 10-year-old having suicidal thoughts.

Later the same day that he sat at his desk telling me he hated me, Jerome was sent home by the principal for another infraction. At the end of the day, after the other students had gone home, I saw him walking up the front steps of the school with his mother. He had come back with a card, a bottle of lotion, and a balloon (likely all that his family could afford to get, but I also felt that he had chosen these items himself). That card with his name sprawled simply above the printed message was one of the most precious possessions I was given as a teacher.

Jerome represented for me the student who I so desperately wanted to help in my future career path. He was only in my classroom for five months before we were finally able, through several meetings with administrators, his mother, and other teachers, to have him placed in a classroom with many fewer students and a teacher qualified to work with students who needed more individualized attention. Because of resistance from various systems and individuals in his life, he had slipped through from classroom to classroom, likely with the emotional turmoil inside becoming worse without the proper attention. The entire educational system then had failed Jerome, not just one teacher or school.

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