Chapter 3

From War to Radical Love: A Beloved Community Approach to Postsecondary Trans Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Although LGBTQIA+ literature frequently applies the frame of war to conceptualize the struggle for inclusion, this chapter presents beloved community as a more healing framework for theorizing trans inclusion in higher education. The authors trace the roots of beloved community through relevant educational and theological scholarship. The framework’s three interconnected concepts of radical love, inclusion, and balance are introduced with specific recommendations for trans and cisgendered members of the academic community who seek to create more inclusive and just spaces in the academy. This chapter explores how the beloved community framework can be used to repair harms to the community resulting from misidentification, misgendering, and performative allyship. The authors conclude with a call to apply the beloved community framework to engage in systems-level change to benefit all members of the academic community.

INTRODUCTION

“The aftermath of violence is always bitterness; the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community so that when the battle is over, it’s over, and a new love and a new understanding and a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor.” -Martin Luther King Jr.

As a trans student in their first semester of college, Grey had quickly learned that some days are more difficult than others. Developmental reading was especially challenging for Grey because they never knew what kinds of texts (or responses from classmates) they would encounter. Despite the anxiety of not

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knowing when or how they would have to defend their gender identity and birthright, Grey always wanted to engage with their peers to promote mutual understanding about social justice issues, specifically those relating to gender identity. For example, during a class based on a reading discussing the complications of defining one’s sex (chromosomes) Grey’s instructor offered them an out of the conversation, without penalty or question. Grey politely responded to this offer by saying that they think the best way forward is to engage in dialogue with individuals who hold different identities and perspectives. Their response illustrated Grey’s clear demonstration of beloved community, and yet their instructor, who also identified as a part of the trans community, felt incapable of being able to create that space for themselves or their students. The instructor feared that some other students in the class demonstrated only a surface-level tolerance and did not believe that classroom space was a “safe enough” space for either Grey or themself. The language and actions of Grey’s peers suggested that they were passive allies while Grey clearly sought beloved conversation partners. Such experiences are all too common in the academy.

Pause before Beginning: A Reflexive Invitation

This chapter initiates a difficult conversation about the framing of inclusion and who is included within higher education. Coauthored by a cisgendered and a trans member of the academic community, the chapter embraces the equity and inclusion mantra of “nothing about us without us.” The chapter begins by introducing the concept of beloved community as a theoretical construct drawing from the fields of education and theology. The authors then provide three cases, specific instances where the theory can be applied to practice, in order to illustrate turning away from language of conflict and turning towards community and love. Such an application of the beloved community framework challenges some of the common conceptions of allyship. This reframing—and the stories shared in this chapter—may evoke strong reactions. Readers are invited to engage in a reflexive reading process of centering yourself before the reading, underlining or otherwise marking words or ideas in the text that evoke a strong reaction, examining your feelings and your emotional investment in the ideas that manifest as a result of the text, and questioning the origins (experiences, biases, or stakes) of what makes these reactions or ideas so powerfully emotion-filled (Inoue, 2020). The authors encourage readers to pause their reading to engage in this process as necessary so that the community can collectively (re)imagine inclusivity beyond the linguistic limitations of allyship. This practice of mindfulness encourages all readers to give space and grace, a critical component of building beloved community, to themselves and all members of the community who are different from themselves. Although this chapter was written to and for all members of the community, the authors especially seek to engage cisgendered individuals who need additional support in order to fully engage within the beloved community.

Our Students Deserve Better: The Need for Inclusive Change

As a trans student (Sam) and a professor and program coordinator who serves trans students (Emily), the authors have experienced and witnessed how trans students can experience feelings of isolation and exclusion due to frequent negative incidents in college their (Budge et al., 2020). Trans students are also at increased risk for suicidality (Seelmann, 2016). In this chapter, the authors use the label “trans” to refer to the range of non-cis gendered identities within the gender identity spectrum (Stryker et al., 2008). Based on Sam’s experiences and those of countless other trans students, the authors concur with Nicolazzo (2016c), who argues that “colleges are not safe places for trans* individuals” (p. 539). Roop
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