

# **Grief Work: Being with and Moving Through a Resistance to Change in Teacher Education**

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## Abstract

Both the pandemic and the colonial project of schooling have created conditions for compounded grief to emerge, particularly for communities of color who face disproportionate economic instability and loss, and for educators of color impacted by pushout and demoralization. As teacher educators, we have yet to fully feel into the grief of these circumstances and reckon with our underlying responsibilities to ourselves, our students, and each other. Integrating personal narrative and pedagogical reflections alongside Resmaa Menakem's (2017) distinction between *dirty pain* and *clean pain*, I explore our complicit hesitance to both grief and change in teacher education and the field as a whole. I unravel grief work as a necessary intervention in the field to move from a disembodied ideology of schooling to an embodied praxis of education. Doing so allows both educators and students to make necessary changes from within, with each other, and in our respective learning spaces.

### Key words:

teacher education, embodiment, grief, critical consciousness

It has been two years since my mother transitioned from this earth, her body taken over by leukemia. I remember the Zoom meeting where the doctors informed my dad, my brothers, and I that she had about a week left to live. Each box on the screen showed our different, yet collective shock: the empty glance of my middle brother's tired, watery eyes; my eldest brother's hesitant voice asking what next steps we needed to take; my uncontrollable tears and quickened breath; my dad's whispered apology as he left his computer to mourn in the hidden hallway behind him.

Having spent the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic in isolation to protect my parents, we were then thrown together to quickly figure out Mom's hospice care. In that tender, tumultuous week, Mom embodied the kind of strength that fought for a dignified death at home, teaching us how to surrender to fear, helplessness, and endings. We learned the wholehearted satisfaction of pouring love into our mom, just as she had spent her entire life pouring love into us. We learned to embrace falling apart in front of each other, not in seclusion. Together, we humbly "learned the hard-won lesson that grief demands its due, and it will take by force what is not freely given" (Devich-Cyril, 2021, p. 69). In our reluctance to let go of our beloved mother, my dad's 52-year life partner, we opened ourselves up to grief, to uncertainty, and eventually, new possibilities.

This grief work – the process of collectively surrendering to loss, allowing it to change us from within, and consequently moving others to become more compassionate, more present, more free – is a particular labor we must engage in as critical educators, especially right now. The ongoing pandemic and outpouring calls for racial, economic, gender, disability and climate justice have incited a rupture in our "normal" ways of being, relating, and teaching. Youth of color, who were already disproportionately suffering from disengagement and punitive policies in schools, are now increasingly impacted by economic instability and the loss of family members (Jones et al 2021). Educators, especially educators of color, are considering leaving the field at unprecedented rates as they navigate the combined impacts of burnout, grief, and demoralization (Everett & Dunn, 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Zamarro et al, 2021).

Psychotherapist Francis Weller (2015) explains that grief is not just about losing something or someone; it also regards the deep disappointment of what we expected yet did not receive. As a teacher educator, I think about the complicated grief of students who enrolled in a credential program as the pandemic emerged and did not anticipate how the field of education would be deeply complicated and transformed – especially as more schools call on novice educators to fill in amongst staff shortages, take on multiple teaching assignments, and

respond to increasing mental health challenges with insufficient support.

As teacher educators, we have yet to fully “acknowledge the rupture” (Roy, 2020) of these circumstances, grieve what we may have lost, and reckon with our underlying responsibilities to ourselves, our students, and each other. Even before the pandemic, there was already so much to grieve inside of schools: the ways in which the subtractive, colonial project of schooling denigrates the spirits, cultures, and identities of minoritized students, particularly for Black and indigenous youth (Love, 2019; Valenzuela, 2005); the toxic conditions of schools that push out critical educators and educators of color (Navarro et al, 2020); the “tremendous toll that schooling takes on the body” of all whom are compelled to disappear and deny parts of themselves to survive, fit in, and succeed (Marie & Watson, 2020, p. 30).

An integral part of grief work is negotiating both our resistance to change and building our capacity to be open to change. Across the field of education, we are witnessing and experiencing a deep resistance to change, evidenced by a doubling-down on fascist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal ideologies. As hard-earned victories in ethnic studies and anti-racist teaching become more institutionalized, right-wing politicians continue to attack and dampen efforts towards racial justice in education. As inclusive

practices and language for LGBTQI folks enters our mainstream workspaces and lexicons, a conservative agenda has arisen to try and eradicate the word “gay” and the humanity of gender-expansive peoples in schools. An old, weakened world is dying, and its beneficiaries hold on to strategies of “avoidance, blame, and denial” (Menakem, 2017, p. 20) to soften the blow of a new emerging world. I wonder how much different our world would be if we were taught earlier how to grieve, especially when we are faced with the necessity of letting go of our own power and privilege for the sake of others’ wellness. Grief has taught me that yes, letting go is hard, but that is also sometimes necessary.

I am not exempt from such a hesitance to change. As a teacher educator, I recently noticed a visceral reluctance to change within myself and across my college. After losing my mom, I took a semester-long leave to properly grieve. When I returned to teach, I could feel an unsettledness in my gut and a fogginess in my brain as I tried to plan for the fast-approaching Fall 2021 semester. I did not feel ready to leave the cocoon of my home that had kept me safe from what felt like the impending doom of COVID-19. The first few weeks of the semester were virtual to help us transition back in-person, and in that time numerous students vocalized their anxieties about returning – some were caring for immune-compromised family members or young children

<sup>1</sup>Lara (2002) coined *bodymindspirit* as a critique against mind/body dualism in academia and beyond and a reclamation of wholeness for Chicana feminists and other women of color. I use the term *pedagogies of bodymindspirit* (Author, 2018) to highlight ways to engage the full humanity of our students and ourselves in our learning spaces.

at home, some had lost several family members to COVID, others were scared of exposing their own students to illness, others were managing their own heightened stress as working-class students juggling financial and familial responsibilities. Despite the top-down policy that we all return to in-person teaching, along with my fear of censure as an untenured professor, I decided to teach in-person for students who felt ready to return and simultaneously teach on Zoom for students who needed that accommodation. While students appreciated my hybrid accommodation, I was met with disapproval by some colleagues and received a college-wide letter re-asserting the policy to teach exclusively in-person.

That same semester, I noticed a different hesitation to change in my teacher credential courses, where I struggled to connect ideologically with some students about the role of race. In a conversation after my English and History methods class, one student questioned my use of a cartoon about indigenous peoples in Los Angeles, likening the text to communist propaganda. I purposefully made time to listen to the student's perspectives, empathizing with his experiences, most of which were rooted in a desire for his European ancestry to be seen in school curriculum. I attempted to help him understand that in his effort to humanize himself and his history, his deficit framings of others were harmful to Indigenous and marginalized peoples and consequently to his

future students. While it was a frustrating, yet generative conversation, I am not sure how much the student shifted his perspectives. What was missing from our conversation was an acknowledgement of how my curricular choices made him feel (perhaps angry? anxious?) that connected to his longing to be seen. His attachment to whiteness and his unexamined feelings prevented him from envisioning a world where multiple peoples could belong.

I want to be clear that I am offering these two examples - not to shame any particular person or entity, but to instead bring curiosity to our collective and complicit hesitation to change in education. Building upon Marie and Watson (2020) who summon us to slow down and mourn our attachment to schooling, I ask: When the waves of change approach us, how and why do we resist it? What can we learn inside of that hesitation, particularly as it is felt inside of our bodymindspirits<sup>1</sup>? How might being with our grief provide a bridge between reluctance and possibility?

Therapist and somatics scholar Resmaa Menakem's (2017) distinction between *dirty pain* and *clean pain*<sup>2</sup> can help unravel the necessary embodied skills to move from the dehumanizing habits of schooling to a humanizing praxis of education. Like my process of ongoing grief and gratitude for my mother, I want to emphasize that this is not a prescription towards correctness, but an invitation to pause and listen, to let go of control, to

<sup>1</sup>I uplift the work of Leora Wolf-Prusan and Oriana Ides of the School Crisis Recovery Renewal Project, who have facilitated powerful professional development with our teacher education department to learn about trauma-informed principles and practice collective grief work. Our discussion of the distinction between dirty and clean pain has largely inspired this essay.

concede power when necessary, and to find our agency as we transition into what comes next. In other words, transformative education requires building our willingness and capacity to grieve.

### **Moving in between dirty pain and clean pain**

According to Menakem (2017), dirty pain is a highly systematized, unconscious response to untended wounds that often results in avoidance, blame, and denial. While these responses may seem convenient at the moment, they actually prolong suffering for ourselves and our relationships. Yet it is difficult to transform these habits because dirty pain is a systematic response, where we are physiologically and evolutionarily wired to protect ourselves from any perceived or real threat – it is not something we do “on purpose” or something we can talk our way out of, because it is our survival brain’s automatic strategy towards self-preservation.

Menakem uses this concept to unpack how the belief systems of white supremacy become internalized into coping strategies that falsely perceive Blackness and anything in proximity to Blackness as a threat. Anything related to this supposed threat – the approaching of a Black body, the mention of race, for example – gets met with responses of “constricted bodies,

frozen attitudes, and closed minds” (104). Hence, our role as teacher educators to work towards racial justice requires us to tend to the “emotional dimensions of critical consciousness raising—the idea that affects move us, and therefore, are at the root of the beliefs undergirding the shifts to blockages in our pedagogical practices” (Ohito, 2017, 193). If we are to shift deeply entrenched worldviews that protect whiteness and other systems of oppression, we must learn how to tend to the emotions underlying them.

To disrupt dirty pain in teacher education, therefore, requires us to acknowledge the ways in which emotions – including grief, anger, and joy – are largely denied, avoided, and invalidated in the teaching profession. Several scholars note that the dehumanization inherent to schooling stems partly from an ideology of disembodiment – the Cartesian notion that insists thinking be attached from feeling, which has rippled into other false binaries that seek to separate the pedagogical from the political, the student from the teacher, the professional from the personal, and so on (Cariaga, 2018; Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Ohito, 2017). Within education, grief takes on a particular kind of dirty pain called *disenfranchised grief* (Doka, 2002; Rowling, 2008; Wolf-Prusan, 2021), where structural policies, practices, and internalized narratives work in tandem to deny educators the right and resources to mourn the many losses experienced in schools. Through

the lens of dirty pain and the work of radical feminists like Audre Lorde (2012) and Gloria Anzaldúa (2013), we know that emotions pose a threat to systems of oppression and are therefore a fertile resource for transformation. In *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief*, Milstein (2017) emphasizes that "we must disrupt the expectation that pain should be hidden away, buried, privatized - a lie manufactured so as to mask and uphold the social order that produces our many, unnecessary losses. When we instead open ourselves up to the bonds and losses of pain, we lessen what debilitates us...Crucially, we have a way, together, to undo deadening and deadly structures intent on destroying us" (p. 4).

To undo the disembodiment inherent to schooling and teacher education, we must learn to listen to the needs underneath our enactments of dirty pain and our relative resistance to change. For example, underneath my reluctance to return to in-person teaching were deep-held fears:

***If I get sick, will I expose my family? If students get sick, am I responsible? What would that say about me as a mother and a professor?***

When I peel back the layers of my behaviors, anxieties, and internal questions, I can touch into a socially and self-constructed identity that has relied on a semblance of control, perfection, and competence in order to feel belonging in my family and survive the academy. When I read Malkia Devich-Cyril's (2021) unflinching account of how they also lost their mother to cancer and their consequent resistance to grief, I realized that I was engaging in a similar form of dirty pain. My obsession with safety during the pandemic and getting work "right" was actually masking the guilt I had from losing my mom - because no matter how hard I worked, nor how much I cared, I could not save her. I could not control my mother's disease, and so I tried finding that control in my teacher education work. Menakem's conceptualization of dirty pain is helpful here, because it helps me understand how my fears of returning to teach in-person were shaped by the trauma of my mother's death, combined with the real threats of an ongoing pandemic, as well as the ways I have been socialized within my family and various institutions into an individualistic mentality of saviorism.

Grief, however, continues to teach me that habits of dirty pain - denial, avoidance, and blame, predicated upon the self and others - can trap us into cycles of isolation and shame, foreclosing the possibility of meeting other important core needs, like connection, vulnerability,

support, wholeness, and transformation. These needs became my core values as I approached a new semester, armed with both grief and clarity about how I wanted to move, learn, and be with students. With a commitment to embodied presence and the support of skilled therapists and beloved community, I learned to feel through the rupture of my mother's death, in addition to my anger against the ongoing violence of academia, grieving moments where I had lost faith and agency.

This, in turn, created space for me to find new possibilities in the liminal grief work of negotiating the contradictions of agency and surrender. It was quite messy, unfamiliar territory for me to figure out how to offer hybrid options to students, as I worked through unpredictable technological glitches alongside students' patience. This helped me unlearn my tendencies towards perfection and orderliness, giving permission for students to do the same. Although I could not promise complete safety amidst the pandemic, I could at least cultivate emotional safety by beginning every class with a Mindful Minute, using either breathing, movement, or reflection to tune into ourselves, nurture home in our bodies, and reclaim embodiment in our learning spaces. We also took time at the beginning and throughout the course to share our personal needs in order to care for one another and be successful together.

Grief has also humbled me to the impermanence of life and has consequently challenged me to prioritize the essentials beyond teaching in the academy: my wellness, sanity, family, and joy. I therefore learned to be clearer in my syllabus policies about my own boundaries around time and capacity, while reminding students that they, too, get to be in their full humanity as they learn to develop humanizing learning spaces of their own. I have long understood that dignity, belonging, and wholeness are important principles for teaching. Sitting with my own grief these past two years has helped me embody these principles from the inside out.

The internal, relational, and pedagogical processes I describe above represent ways that I have learned to move from *dirty pain* to what Menakem (2017) describes as *clean pain*, which

enables us to engage our integrity and tap into our body's inherent resilience and coherence, in a way that dirty pain does not. Paradoxically, only by walking into our pain or discomfort – experience it, moving through it, and metabolizing it – can we grow... The body can settle; more room for growth is created in its nervous system; and the self becomes freer and more capable, because it now has access to energy that was previously protected, bound, and constricted. When this happens, people's lives often improve in other ways as well. (p. 20)

When teacher educators can learn to be with their own grief and practice this process of clean pain for themselves and with their students, it improves the field of education into expansive possibilities “of becoming more fully human” together (Carter-Andrews et al, 2019, p. 10).

But the work of grief and clean pain in teacher education cannot happen in a vacuum - it requires a safe landing place for both students and educators to feel and be heard, ongoing critical reflection about the power dynamics that impact safety and expression, support from skilled mental health practitioners, and a redistribution of resources and time to develop such skills and structures. Grief work requires that we learn to discern the difference between safety and discomfort, which Carter-Andrews et al (2019) aptly describe here:

Students often equate safety with no disruption in the equilibrium of their emotions or the firmness of their values and belief system. Some of our students experience vulnerability, guilt, and even defensiveness in our classroom spaces, and we want them to understand that these are normal reactions to a disruption of their socialization. But it does not mean that we allow for any personal attack. The courageous atmosphere in our classrooms is shaped by students’ ability to sit in those emotions and grapple with what triggers them and how they move beyond those emotions to useful action for change. (p. 10)

Nurturing a genuine, felt sense of safety also means that we absolutely do not require nor passively encourage educators or students to disclose their trauma stories in an attempt to practice clean pain. Without proper training, informed consent, and skilled mental health support, asking individuals to share narratives of pain can actually cause more harm. Just as good educators take time to build community to set the stage for deeper learning, it is best to work first to cultivate the necessary conditions of safety, connection, and playfulness that can allow everyone to be in their bodies and with each other.

If the work of re-integrating embodiment and grief into teacher education sounds foreign and daunting, this is actually a good place to begin. Start with asking: what is it about grief, emotions, and/or the body that makes us feel uncomfortable? How does that discomfort show up in our personal and pedagogical lives? What persons, places, items, or practices might help support us in exploring and being with that discomfort? From there, the hope is that we as educators and life-long learners can eventually

make meaning of the context of [our] own lives, the lives of [our] students, and the context and conditions of our school communities. The grief involved therein demands educators transform, to challenge and contend with our pedagogical practice, (Wolf-Prusan, 2021.)

as well as our institutional norms and values. Grief work in teacher education is not a seamless, linear movement from dirty pain to clean pain; rather, it requires in us an ongoing commitment to be with, and move through our pain, however it may emerge, and towards an openness to change for ourselves, each other, and our potential futures.

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