The Winds of Katrina Still Call Our Names

How Do Teachers and Schools Confront Social Justice Issues?

Joan T. Wynne

As Educator Leaders, Where Do We Stand?

I was invited last year to talk to participants at the Conference of Educational Leaders (CEL) in Nashville, Tennessee. When I learned about the theme of this conference, "Where We Stand: Issues in Educational Leadership," I was intrigued because I grew up in a segregated south when the answer to "Where do I stand" could be a life-defining moment. Some schools were closed in answer to that question. Some teachers went to jail answering that question. And some people died answering that question.

Yet often in the field of education, I believe, too many slink away from addressing, "Where do we stand." That this group of English educators had gathered to make its stand clear felt like a significant democratic act; it seemed a counter to the country's recent inclinations for cowardice. And I felt fortunate to be among them.

To help explain where I stand, I want to call forth the spirits of those who over a year ago lost their lives in a nation who refused to stand up for them, victims of a storm the government calls Katrina. After watching the horrid images of that national disaster unfold in New Orleans, I promised myself and the staff of our Center at Florida International University, that no matter what circle I found myself, I would raise the issues that caused this human tragedy—in hopes that together we who educate the children of our country will take a united stand to stop the madness that allows debacles like the aftermath of Katrina to wreak havoc in the lives of children.

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One of my favorite poets, Wm. Stafford, said, For it is important that awake people be awake,/or a breaking line may/discourage them back to sleep;/the signals we give—/yes, no, or/maybe/should be clear;/ the darkness around us is deep. Yes, "The darkness around us in education is deep." And the Winds of Katrina are still calling our names.

What will we say—yes, no, or maybe?—for the outrage spurred by the memory of watching live news footage of thousands of people abandoned by their government in a major U. S. city, for days on end, becomes almost unbearable. Televised images of bodies, faces down, floating in toxic waters, babies and elders, people in wheelchairs dying before our eyes, as we sat in the comfort of our living-rooms, will continue to shake the inner stuffings of our souls. Those images become the newest nightmares in our tormented sleep, a sleep already crowded by pictures of Iraqi women and children blown to bits through shock and awe, dead 18-, 19-, 20- year old U.S. soldiers, and tortured prisoners in secret cells.

Those images, that outrage—How do we, as educational leaders, address them? How do we stop the nightmares? For ourselves? For teachers? For students? How do we counter the national propensity to return to denial, to "business as usual"? How do we discourage the nation from falling back asleep? "Where do we stand?" How do we use this horrific travesty of justice as a catalyst for teaching us to become active participants in the formidable task that the poet Langston Hughes long ago charged us to do? Langston said to all of us: "Let America be America again/ Let it be the dream it used to be.../ we, the people must redeem/The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers. /The mountains and the endless plain—/And make America again!" How do we bring that message into the public school discourse?

Katrina brutally exposed the "two Americas" that have always existed, but this dichotomy has rarely before been so dramatically unmasked in so many living rooms of so many homes in America at the same moment, creating a giant opportunity for us to start this conversation about race, class, and redemption. When I was in New Orleans after Katrina and witnessed the gripping difference in the damages in one part of the city, the 9th Ward, versus that of the powered-up garden district, I was struck once again by the stark disparities in the distribution of our country's resources. When I saw whose schools were open, and whose were shut, I cringed at the echoed sounds of ole "Dixie" playing in my head. Indeed, has the Confederate South, I wondered, risen again, only this time in D.C. or did it never really go away?

I asked myself then as I ask you now—how do we as educators use this nationally shared, excruciatingly painful, historical experience, this blight on the soul of America, to catapult us into a new direction for our colleges, our schools, and the country? Vincent Harding (1999), asked us in *Hope and History*, "Who are the teachers, and what is the curriculum that will prepare us to redeem the land, to remake a nation?" His question seems the one most worthy of attention in reckoning with our responsibility as teachers and as teachers of teachers to rectify the wrongs of racist policies and practices that use schools to help sustain a divided nation.

There are teachers and students in New Orleans who are right now participating in answering Harding's question, teachers like Chris Mayfield; Adriane Frazier; and the co-directors of Students at the Center, Kalamu Ya Salaam and Jim Randels. We might invite them into these

circles, have them do our keynotes, invite them into our college classrooms and our leadership meetings to learn lessons from them. What might we learn if we invited the grassroots energy and wisdom into this room, into this circle, in this time, and in all our circles?

What might we learn from those in the Young People's Project (YPP), those youngsters who in the immediate aftermath of Katrina designed the "Finding Our Folks Tour" (FOF), Omo Moses, Chris Adagbonyin, Anasa Phoenix, and others? These young people traveled the Southeast, reaching out through educational workshops, to the displaced students and parents who had been tossed to the four winds, landing in unfamiliar cities and states, living in stadiums and armed camps in Boston, insulted in Texas by the mother of the president of the United States of America. I would like to suggest that if we as educators find and privilege the voices of those folks, then, maybe, we too can hope to find ourselves—to reconnect with the visions, the ideals that brought us to this work in the beginning of our professional lives.

If we are serious about being literacy advocates, then, we also need to be serious about including the history, the art, the science, the music, and the voices of those who are on the margins of citizenship. And not just for their sakes, but also for ours. For until our children, mainstream children, learn the truth of the histories of indigenous and marginalized people, they will have learned not only an incomplete American story, but a 400 year old lie that will continue to bamboozle them as they try to navigate a global society that does not match the story they were told in their schools. Stafford says, "If you don't know the kind of person that I am, and I don't know the kind of person that you are, a pattern that others made may prevail in the world, and following the wrong god home, we may miss our star." We do not want our children missing their star because they do not know each others' stories, each other's music, art, culture, values. All children, but especially the survivors of Katrina, have much to teach us.

Let us together shake up the rigid hierarchichal structures that privilege only the stories of the elite in our midst. Let us practice radical philosophies like that of Ella Baker, who always listened for the wisdom of the folks at the bottom. She sought after their insights, their inspiration. In doing that could we then, break down the walls of our schools and be with and learn from the people at the bottom? Let those transactions together change all of us. Through such a process might we begin in schools to build a new democracy that includes and responds to everyone? That leaves no one face down, abandoned in toxic waters? Is that where we stand?

Can we, unlike our political leaders, in the aftermath of Katrina, find the moral ground to stand, speak and act, as a collective power, against the tyranny of unequal education, against schooling that keeps our black and brown children doomed to standing on rooftops watching the waters of an undemocratic system rise to sink them? When will we, as a united community of teacher leaders, take that stand?

Can we use Katrina (an event that continues to graphically expose the grotesque and savage inequalities of the status quo) as the crucible to transform the mission of our colleges and schools? Can we join with other educators across the country to demand that public schools in New Orleans, in Miami, in Atlanta, in America be protected from the profiteers who plan to deny the community its legitimate participation in the decision-making process about its own schools?

Certainly, individuals in many colleges and public schools address the impact of race, class, and power on schools, yet the institutions as a whole continue, even a year after Katrina, to ignore the imperative to explicitly and consistently deal with these issues. Human justice must become an institutional mantra, not just the conversation of a few. The outrage produced by the continuing neglect and abuse of the citizens of New Orleans, America's citizens, must be addressed. And if colleges of education and public schools are not up to the task, then we need to close our doors. If we cannot redeem ourselves, then we are not the ones to lead the dialogue on redeeming America.

The darkness around us is deep. What will we say? Yes? No? Or maybe? When and where will we take our stand? When I think about teachers across the country taking that collective stand, I hear the words of Arundhati Roy when she said, "Not only is another world possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

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