Embers of Hope:
In Search of a Meaningful Critical Pedagogy

By William Ayers, Gregory Michie, & Amy Rome

Critical pedagogy. Whatever insurgent energy once pulsed through those words — giving them life and investing them with power and possibility — has been largely lost, their meaning sapped away with overuse and misuse, reduction and dogmatic application. Years ago Jim Sanders (1987) from the University of Western Ontario wrote a satirical *Thesaurus for the Critical Theorist of Education,* a Column A, Column B, Column C approach that guaranteed users that they, too, could be spouting profundities in no time. Column A included: critically, ethically, politically, historically, and so on; Column B: transformative, grounded, structural, dominant, mediated, and more; Column C: discourse, pedagogy, authority, community, ideology, and the like. Simply by selecting words at random, and then combining them in A + B + C fashion, for example, critically mediated discourse," or "historically grounded pedagogy," we become members of the cult. Beware of the Kool Aid.

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Sanders' joke works precisely because it's so damned familiar — we do sometimes talk like that, and we really do hear those by-now stock phrases flying around, available in the very air we breathe. The words do begin to sound not just random, but empty and then meaningless as well.

This does not come, of course, as a complete surprise. Yesterday's iconoclasts are often today's

icons, and every revolution, large or small, finds a way to destroy its own Utopia. Still, there's a lesson and a message here: now is as good a time as any other to challenge our own orthodoxy, to rethink basic principles, to storm our own headquarters. We should act on behalf of our students, ourselves, and our deepest hopes for a better world.

We try to do just that in our work with new teachers at a big city public university. Our purpose is not to indoctrinate them in the discourse of critical pedagogy (or in any other discourse, for that matter), but to join them on a journey as "becoming" teachers, and to encourage them — as we encourage ourselves — to remain skeptical, curious, and wide-awake along the way. Our goals for ourselves and for our students are as complex, dynamic, and contested as we hope their goals will be as teachers of children: to learn to see students fully and fairly, as three-dimensional creatures much like ourselves; to see ourselves as active agents of change in our schools and in our worlds; and to find practical application in public school classrooms for our commitment to social justice and human freedom.

There is more, of course, but this is a start. And it's more than nice-sounding rhetoric. For us, these goals provide standards to refer back to in the messy, incomplete, idiosyncratic work of teaching. We can end each day critical of where we failed, and begin the next with a plan of action that might bring us closer. In doing so, we try to remain mindful of our own evolution as teachers — the political, cultural, and social agendas we brought to teaching with us, and the ways our politics have been subsequently shaped by our work in schools.

Some of our students bring a critical orientation with them into our program, and for many of them, connecting teaching to activism and social change makes perfect sense. Others have a harder time making that leap, while still others actively resist and resent it. Interestingly, we've seen only a limited correlation between those who embrace a critical perspective and those who are "successful" as first-year teachers — either in traditional terms or in terms of enacting a disruptive pedagogy. Moreover, some students who we initially pigeonhole as just the sort of people who should not become teachers in urban schools end up surprising us — and forcing us to question how fully or fairly we'd "seen" them in the first place.

Sherry Anderson grew up on a ranch in Wyoming and moved to the city with dreams of becoming a teacher. She was young — 23 or so — white, and while she got along well with the other students in her cohort and was eager to learn, she also seemed extremely naïve about issues of race, culture, and urban schooling. Sherry put her foot in her mouth during seminars more times than we can recall — saying she was "surprised how clean" one of her student's homes was, or that she "love[d] those little Chinese kids" — and the papers she turned in were far from spectacular. Her idea of a "critical" teaching lesson (a portfolio assignment for our students) was to have her second graders bring in old items from home to sell to each other in a class store. We're still trying to figure out what the point of that one was.

But as it turned out, there was more to Sherry Anderson than we had initially

been willing to see. When it came time to apply for full-time teaching positions in the fall, she went into the heart of a struggling community on the city's south side and secured a job. As the school year progressed, she continued to surprise us. She was firm but fair with her students, all of whom were African American, and she worked hard to get to know them as individuals. She ate lunch with her class, visited homes occasionally, and developed a close relationship with a mentor at the school — a black woman who'd been teaching nearly twenty years. Unlike many of our other students, she rarely had major classroom management issues, and she usually came to seminars ready to share and listen rather than to vent and complain. She still had her moments of naiveté — asking students to sit "Indian style" or repeatedly referring to Martin Luther King as "MLK"—but she was open to constructive criticism and tried to make changes in light of it. Sherry may not have been consciously enacting critical pedagogy, but it could be argued that her efforts to challenge her students academically while also striving to "see" them more fully were political acts in themselves — whether she named them that way or not.

Sherry's seemingly accidental success makes the entire notion of critical pedagogy a bit muddier. A lot of what we discussed in our seminars seemingly sailed over her head, yet she's becoming a committed and effective urban teacher in spite of it. Other students, who could debate philosophy endlessly and clearly articulate the political implications of their work, floundered early that year on many levels, and some never really recovered. The lesson, for us, is that there is nothing automatic about who teaches with an eye on social justice, or even about what "teaching for change" looks like from one situation to the next. Critical perspectives don't always translate into critical practice, and — just as importantly — teachers who haven't mastered the Critical Theorist's Thesaurus can still do important work in schools.

Last fall, we encouraged our students to develop curriculum that would challenge the conventional festive approach to the Thanksgiving holiday. To help them prepare, we examined multiple perspectives of the events that led to the initial celebration of the holiday, countering the mythology of the benevolent friendship between the white settlers and the indigenous people. A Mexican-American professor, well versed in critical pedagogy and post-colonial studies, met with our students to discuss some of the ways schools have perpetuated Eurocentric views of the Thanksgiving story. Finally, we introduced activities that might push elementary-aged students to re-think the well-worn Pilgrims-and-Indians narrative, which might provoke them to question the unjust invasion and pillaging of indigenous people's homes and land. We rallied around the critique, and off to school they went.

But not so fast. While some of our students embraced the idea of countering the traditional elementary-school approach to Thanksgiving, others struggled to reconcile a more critical take on the holiday with the flood of happy memories they cherished from childhood. Tina Cass, a white teacher in a school with a student population that is mostly African American, wrote in a reflective paper: "One of my

fondest memories of elementary school was the annual Thanksgiving celebration. We would spend weeks making our Pilgrim or Indian costumes, perfecting every detail of a large black Pilgrim hat or a feather-laden Indian headdress. Finally, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, we would don our costumes and act out the arrival of the Mayflower. After the performance, Pilgrims and Indians alike would all sit down to a big lunch of turkey, mashed potatoes and stuffing. I enjoyed this Thanksgiving ritual so much, that I couldn't sleep in the weeks leading up to the big event." For Tina, the first hurdle was to confront thirty years of coasting through the holiday, to take a step back and look at her own Thanksgiving experiences more critically.

After careful consideration and planning, Tina decided to read a simulation story to her second-grade students that represented the perspective of the native inhabitants — one that she hoped would lead to a subsequent discussion "about how the Indians might have felt." She got that and more. "[When] I introduced the idea that the white man came over from England and mistreated the Indians," Tina recalled, "my students were very excited, discussing the topic with great passion. Student after student raised their hand to tell of some other atrocity committed by the 'white man.' 'White people went over to Africa and stole my people.' 'They stole the land in Africa too!' My only answer to the list of accusations was, 'Yes, yes that's true.' One of my students even said, half jokingly, 'Ms. Cass, are you going to come over and take my house?' My answer (which after saying it, I realized was really a lie) was, 'White people don't do that anymore.' I was paralyzed by guilt; the guilt of hundreds of years of atrocities committed by my ancestors and my race; guilt for the segregation and stereotyping that continues today."

Tina's work as a teacher, of course, is not about absolving her own guilt — among other things, it's about building bridges of understanding for her students, making space for their voices to be heard, and helping them to access the language of power (Delpit, 1995). But sometimes we have to confront our own fears and biases in the process — a reality that is especially true for white teachers working in urban schools. Tina's students taught her two important lessons that day — lessons that we all should bear in mind: First, that teaching against racism and against the status quo is never finished in a lesson or a unit or even a semester — rather, it should be an ongoing, many-faceted project, part of the very fabric of the life of a classroom. Second, that as teachers we must continually remind ourselves that we are learners as well. This sounds simple enough, but it can be uncomfortable when, as in Tina's case, students challenge us to open doors we hadn't imagined, to delve more deeply than we'd planned, to learn more than we had originally wanted to know.

But the story doesn't end there. Soon after their animated discussion about the impact of colonization, Tina's students soon began expressing a desire to return to the more typical Thanksgiving fare. The pull of the conventional narrative, she found, was strong. "Every day as Thanksgiving approached," she wrote, "there was

more of an outcry from my students. They wanted to color turkeys and make Indian headdresses. My students are only in second grade, but already the simple traditions are so ingrained in them that they missed them. Perhaps most troubling for me was their love of Thanksgiving, without any real understanding about what it meant. Unfortunately, I don't think I accomplished much this year to change that fact."

Tina's unblinking self-criticism is not uncommon among the new teachers in our program. Many become overwhelmed by the notion that they are falling short of their aims, that they aren't doing enough in the service of the kids they teach. But we remind them — as gently as possible — that that's part of the bargain. Once you make the commitment to teaching toward a better world, one of the first things you realize is that your work will never be done. Perhaps the biggest challenge, then, becomes holding on to hope, and that can be exceedingly difficult — especially when the discourse surrounding teaching and schools is so unendingly pessimistic.

Critical theory is not exempt from proliferating such gloom and doom. In fact, it does so quite well. Robert Bullough and Andrew Gitlin (1995) describe how they came to this realization during their early years as teacher educators. Influenced by the work of critical theorists, they "saw schools as factories, driven by class interests and infused with the values of a technocracy: control and efficiency" (p. 6). Their emphasis in their teacher preparation courses was on the ways schools constrain and place limits on teachers and students, but the authors say that this soon became a constricting and disabling approach: "[I]magine having as your central professional message [as a teacher educator] that schools are lousy places to work, young people are alienated, and the curriculum is fundamentally and perhaps fatally flawed! True or not, a year is a long time to endure such fare, and perhaps even a longer time to push it" (p. 8).

Critique of public schools, and of our roles as teachers and teacher educators, is essential, but it can become debilitating, we believe, if not informed by a vision of hope, if not linked to action in classrooms that moves us toward something better for all children — especially those who have been historically ill-served by public schools. We're reminded of a scene from Richard Linklater's 2001 film *Waking Life,* in which four young men are ambling down a street, spouting off effortlessly about the nature of reality and the exercising of free will. Their philosophizing is interrupted when they come across an old man perched at the top of a streetlamp post, looking somewhat bewildered.

> "Hey, old man, what you doing up there?," one of the guys asks.
> "I'm not sure," comes the reply.
> "You need any help getting down, sir?"
> The old man looks around. "Uhhh . . . I don't think so."
> As the group walks off, one of the guys shakes his head. "Stupid bastard," he mutters.
> "No worse than us," offers another of the four. "He's all action and no theory. We're all theory and no action."

In our work with new teachers, critical theory has proven useful in urging us to think more deeply with our students about the question, "What are we teaching against?" It's been less helpful, though, in guiding us toward a practical vision of what it is we're teaching for — and, more importantly, what actions we might take to get there form here. Critical theorists themselves have acknowledged their tendency to concentrate too much on developing a "language of resistance" and not enough on a "language of possibility" (Giroux, cited in Ruiz, 1997, p. 324), and whether you're in a classroom every day working to make a real difference in children's lives, or visiting classrooms in an effort to help new teachers improve their practice, such writing can leave you feeling not only discouraged, but also like a bit of a stooge. "Don't you get it," some of the critical work seems to be saying to teachers. "What you're doing doesn't matter."

As teacher educators, we refuse to become permanently mired in this "relentless scrutiny of failure" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 29). We refuse, in part, because we see how hard the new teachers in our program are working — sometimes in lonely isolation, other times in concert with others — to do something different in their classrooms, to affect change in their schools, to create spaces in which kids feel respected and significant and valued. They wouldn't all cite critical pedagogy as the bedrock of their work with children, and their attempts at "teaching for change" may seem modest compared to some of the more elaborate proposals of critical theorists. But we would argue that the work they are doing is "critical" in more ways than one. Many of them understand all too well that the system is pathological, but dismantling it, at least for the moment, is beyond their reach. So they do what they can, taking small steps, creating little disruptions, trying all the while to keep their eyes on the bigger picture, the road ahead.

Let us be clear: We're not suggesting that every teacher who simply hangs up a picture of Rosa Parks in February should be lauded as a "change agent," or that we should celebrate token gestures toward "tolerance" or "multiculturalism," or be self-satisfied in any sense about our own teaching or complacent about the state of public education. Clearly, there is much work that needs to be done to move public schools closer to realizing their promise, and as teachers and teacher educators, we should all keep pushing ourselves to reach further and do more. In that regard, critique is both necessary and useful.

But having spent many years teaching in urban schools ourselves, we understand better than some the potential limitations and excesses of a detached critical perspective. It's easy to stand on the outside and sneer at the work of classroom teachers who are trying to teach against the grain, and to dismiss their efforts as watered down or accommodationist. What's harder is to actually do something different, to enact a pedagogy that is deep and critical and engaging to kids, that helps them, in the words of one young teacher we know, "overcome whatever they need to overcome" (Serrano, personal communication, 2002). If we insist on measuring our work solely by how radically it moves us toward overthrowing our

present system of schooling — and write off all more modest efforts as insufficient or unworthy — then we handcuff ourselves. We agree with Hall (1993), who says "Radical change is the ultimate goal, but if the available options are reformist acts or political paralysis the choice seems clear. Incremental change should be valued as the means to a goal; the global begins in our backyard but obviously does not end there" (p. 166).

In the weeks leading up to the war on Iraq, one of our students, a middle-grades teacher, engaged her class in an extended study of the looming conflict. After having her students read and analyze newspaper articles, she asked them to take a stand on whether or not the United States should declare war. Students defended their positions in writing, and held a lively mock debate in the classroom. Reflecting on the experience, the teacher said, "I'm not sure the project was effective. I mean, I'm not sure they fully understand what we've done here." Maybe. But in a time when the very act of asking questions was being seen as a threat to national unity and security, she was creating space in her classroom for her students to do so, and encouraging them to reach toward a critical awareness of the events that swirled around them. Not a revolutionary act, perhaps, but certainly a step in the right direction.

At times, the steps we take with our students toward our vision of a more just world seem small indeed. But as Audre Lorde once wrote — as quoted on a spray-pained wall in Harlem — "Even the smallest victory is never to be taken for granted. Each victory must be applauded, because it is so easy not to battle at all, to just accept and call that acceptance inevitable." The teachers with whom we work live their classroom lives in the quest of such small victories, and carry on with an abiding faith that, little by little, their collective efforts will lead to something far greater. As we venture with them on the beginning stages of their teaching journeys, we hold onto one another in order to make sense of the world, to see it more clearly and to try to understand it more accurately, to refuse its excesses and to grieve over its savagery. We nourish our little fragments of community in order to help one another find pockets of peace and pathways of resistance, those places where we can keep some small embers of hope burning in the gathering darkness.

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