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Living Engagement

bell hooks
Berea College

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In this “talking chapter” bell hooks reveals, through dialogue about her thoughts and experiences related to college teaching and learning, a profound and robust perspective on what could be called “deep” faculty development. Topics include engaged pedagogy, therapeutic conversations, spiritual practice, difference, conflict, and love.

To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. (hooks, 1994, p. 130)

October 7, 2005, bell hooks’s dining room.

DR: To get started, could you summarize your approach to teaching, what you have called “engaged pedagogy”? What have been some major influences on the development of that perspective?

bh: Perhaps the most influential scholar in relationship to my teaching has been Paolo Freire, coupled with the kind of people who taught me in the segregated schools of the south—the black men and women who were my teachers, who were teaching in resistance, who were teaching at a time when segregation was saying that black children don’t deserve the right to learn to read and think and to have teachers who were

deeply and profoundly committed. When I think about where I learned my love of Shakespeare, it was in those segregated black schools that did not have equal resources. They didn't really even have libraries because library science schools were some of the most racist. Black females couldn't be librarians and it was unheard of for black males. We had only a white librarian who would visit our school once a week. In that atmosphere, learning had such an incredibly precious and engaged element to it. The feeling that learning can transform your life is what led me to Freire and to principles of engaged pedagogy, which talk about the classroom as a community for mutual growth. That is the foundation of my sense of what learning is all about, that it's all about growing and living. So I've always wanted to teach in such a way that unites theory and practice and that enhances students' ability to live in the world more fully.

DR: In *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994) you write,

Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (p. 15)

Faculty who feel overloaded might benefit from some examples of how you set boundaries and attend to your own well-being as a part of your professional practice.

bh: I am a big proponent of therapy. For one, I think that many of us who are intellectuals or academics have often been rewarded for the nourishing of our minds, but not for the nourishing of our psychological well-being. So I think we can be as damaged, if not more so, than a general population in relation to well-being because usually we've been encouraged all our lives to cultivate smarts above all else. We've all encountered professors who lacked basic social skills, and it's not my experience that someone who lacks basic social skills—basic skills of communication—is really a dynamic and wonderful teacher in the classroom. It's one of the myths of genius that one can be this almost sociopathic person who is withholding, withdrawing—all of those things—but somehow be this great person in the classroom. I had no experience of that. Lots of my thinking about teaching really has also emerged from my experience as a student, my sense that often teachers

were acting out of their own ego-centered issues, insecurities, and neuroses. So I think that a teacher's being engaged in processes of critical self-examination, whether with therapists or in therapeutic conversation with colleagues, is important. I have lots of conversations with colleagues just about how we're doing. Here, where I teach at Berea College, one of my favorite colleagues, a younger African-American woman, has been preparing for tenure, and we've had many conversations. I had no such person in my life, an elder who had gone through this experience and who's able to talk to her about balance, about how to best get the packages together, get everything done in ways that don't wear us down psychologically and emotionally. I think those kinds of therapeutic conversations can be part of a general well-being. We get together at least two or more times a week for lunch. That's one of the pleasures of teaching at a small college, in a small town. It doesn't require a big loss of time to get together. I think those things aid in creating a space where our well-being, as professors and teachers, is considered vital—where I can say to her or she to me, "You know, you seem really overextended, overtly tired, what's happening, what's going on?"

DR: It strikes me that college teaching is a helping profession. It's one of the few helping professions, or the only one I can think of, that doesn't emphasize the well-being of the practitioner as an important professional tenet. Which is part of what I hear you saying about college teaching.

bh: Absolutely. Which is why, I think, I've drawn so much on spiritual practice. In the world of spiritual practice with a "spiritual teacher," as in Buddhism, the teacher is expected to have mastered certain arts of self-development and self-awareness. *Mindful awareness* would be the term we would use within Buddhism. For me, it's been helpful to bring that thinking about what it is to be a teacher into the realm of classroom teaching because we often think of the teacher as someone who's a split personality, not as someone who is whole in mind, body, and spirit.

DR: Related to that, it seems to me that the teacher needs to love the self and love the other, or the student, simultaneously. Some experience that need as an antagonistic contradiction, and others experience it as a generative paradox where, by doing both, one feeds the other. Can you comment on that?

bh: The question of love is intriguing because it presupposes the existence of self-love in the teacher, which automatically reverberates back to your question about well-being. Certainly, in many of the ways that I

feel I've grown psychologically in the last 20 years of my life, a lot of that has had to do with the kind of example I wanted to set for my students. I would include growing in the practice of love of myself, which is particularly challenging, I think, as a woman teacher working in a world that is still predominantly male-governed and patriarchal in its thinking, whether that thinking is coming from males or females. It's rugged terrain for feminist women and men and for that practice of self-love that I think automatically dovetails into good practice with our students. I want to be really clear that when I think about love, I think of a combination of six things: care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. How do we bring those into the classroom? How do I bring the quality of love when working with a student whom I may find really awful, whom I may in fact not like, but of whom I can still think about how I can best serve? It's great to be at Berea College, an institution that privileges three things: learning, labor, and service. We are not ashamed to identify ourselves and our students as people who give service. I may best "love" a student by suggesting that I am not the right teacher or my class is not the right class for him or her. I think that it's a hard decision to come to in a climate of free choice, free speech, to say that to a student. We all have had those students who annoy us to death because they disrupt, they take over, they try to deflect attention away from the subject matter at hand. How do you cope with that in a loving way so that it doesn't fragment your learning community or make learning impossible? There, I think, is the highest challenge of how one works with the practice of love in the classroom.

DR: The challenge, if I may paraphrase, would be of trying to respond to the individual and to the whole group at the same time.

bh: When you said that, I thought about Mary Rose O'Reilley's (1998) book, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. She talks so much in this little book about being on the path of love by our presence and how we work with the classroom and what we bring into it. It really is challenging. She talks particularly about those of us who are English teachers who she sees as storytellers in that in many ways we're bringing to the classroom a vision of how to be disciplined storytellers and how to create community around the art and act of storytelling. She says,

We are like old shamans sitting around the fire scaring people half to death, or saving their lives, or healing their hearts. . . . I teach literature and writing, so in my classes it is a two-way

street: I tell stories and I listen to stories. It's quite a weird job for a grown-up. (p. 25)

DR: Is this ability to love the self and the other effectively and simultaneously essentially Gilligan's (1982) third level in developing the capacity to care? It seems to me that what engaged pedagogy is about is learning to love in this way in the professional role of a teacher. Is that something a faculty developer should be helping faculty learn to do?

bh: Absolutely. These questions have come up so much around issues of diversity and multiculturalism. As I've tried to write about in my two teaching books (hooks, 1994, 2003), many of us entered classrooms where we were told, "Oh, we want to be diverse; we want to have multiculturalism," without any preparation for how to deal with difference. How will we deal with the student who comes from a background that you know nothing about or that you may even have some aversion to? The best work that I see being done around faculty development is precisely work that allows people to come to the table to talk about these issues in ways that open up that space for the personal to meet with the theoretical. Early on in the feminist classroom practically everyone was white, and practically everyone was female. In many ways that allowed for a much easier task than what is before us now, where our classrooms are often really diverse. Recently a professor said to me, "I had this class with a small number of men. I went out of my way to make them feel welcome and to really let them know that their perspectives were desired." But in her class evaluations, the majority of the female students said, "You were too hard on the guys." She was really concerned: "How do I address this issue when I felt that I was already bending over backward not to alienate these two or three male students?" I think that the kind of faculty development that allows people to bring concrete problems like that to the table is so much about the practice of love. In the last five years, I pretty much have served as a catalyst for faculty development at different institutions. At Southwestern University in Texas, I had a core group of faculty whom I worked with where we brought issues of concern. Some of them were about religion. What do you do when you're a non-believing professor but you teach at an institution where most of your students are religious? That creates conflict. You're gay, but your students think homosexuality is evil. How do we deal with those concrete things? To me, those are as much faculty development issues as whether we are publishing enough or whether we're getting adequate enrollments. I think that the more sophisticated learning

institutions are trying to bring people together in ways that allow faculty to develop those parts of themselves—those awarenesses around difference, identity, nationality—where they may simply have felt they don't know what to do.

DR: I want to situate this next question within a real event. Recently I was conducting a faculty workshop at a self-described public ivy, a respected university, and the workshop topic was helping students to develop critical thinking while they learn disciplinary content and skills, a common challenge. The workshop was on facilitating this paradigmatic transition in students from dualistic thinking, where the epistemological authority is invested in agents outside the self, to a committed relativism, where the epistemological authority and responsibility lie within the self. The self is seen as someone constructing a reality among whole communities of other selves doing the same thing as best they can. It was about helping students to make that kind of developmental shift. Toward the end of the workshop, a new assistant professor raised her hand and asked me what professors are supposed to do if they themselves operate dualistically. How could she be expected to promote this kind of thinking if she herself did not think that way? In the audience, I saw some other faculty heads nod. Given any developmental model, most people inflate their developmental level, and I thought her candor and courage were remarkable, especially in a group setting. What do you make of this faculty member's question, "If I don't have critical consciousness, how can I be expected to help students to develop it?"

bh: I think that's exactly why bringing these issues to bear on faculty development is so crucial. Most of us have been trained in western metaphysical, dualistic, binary thinking. Then, whammo! Suddenly we have talk of diversity, multiculturalism, post-colonialism, anti-racism. People's modes of learning are called into question, without the training that would help them to undo those modes of learning or even to see the wisdom of undoing them. So that again is why these are all such crucial issues for faculty development. Often what happens is we end up with subcultures within institutions where you have a radicalized faculty, usually women's studies, black studies, gay and queer studies, attempting to do the work of reading against the grain, reading against biases. And then you have another institution that is informed by imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal thinking that just goes on. The question is, how do we reeducate professors who may indeed be closed-minded when it comes to thinking in new ways about the subjects we teach?

- DR:** That's the nut to crack, and I hope you've got some suggestions. If you create these reflective spaces that you talked about before—faculty development as a place to reflect together and to problem solve and to help each other grow—often the people who come, in my experience, are already highly developed and are desiring to develop further. How do you get those other faculty to become involved? With students you've got the power of grades. You can create assignments that make them encounter difference. How do you do that with a faculty?
- bh:** Sophisticated institutions have had to find ways to make that type of faculty development mandatory, and to reward it: you take this seminar in the summertime, and you get extra pay. Or, you take this faculty development course, and you have a one-course release. There are lots of ways to build into structures the time and rewards for faculty development. I think one of the amazing aspects of being a teacher right now is that there are so many unemployed teachers. We really have a body of people available so that faculty could have much more time off to reflect and to work on these issues, if our institutions were more flexible. To my way of thinking, there is no reason why any of us in the academy shouldn't be able to take leave without pay whenever we want to because there are so many people desperate to find jobs, and there is the space for that. We have to be clear and honest about the fact that certain types of pedagogy, engaged pedagogy especially, take a lot of energy. There is a feeling at times of burning out or simply not having the energy. One thing about the old styles of teaching, particularly the banking system, is that they don't require a lot of energy. I remember in my early years at Stanford, we would joke about the aged, white, male professors who would bring the yellowed notes that they had been using for 10 and 15 years to give their lectures. There was an element of rote, and it didn't really require all that much. Engaged pedagogy requires one to be fully present, which makes it so similar to contemplative practice. It requires hands-on labor in the classroom, even in just that small gesture of getting to know who you are teaching. One of the issues I face in my feminism course is that there are often more people there than the hour can absorb. I'm always struck that if we do the business of hearing everyone's voice, we've eaten up a substantial amount of our time together. Yet it's continually essential to creating not only that learning community but allowing people to gauge what is interesting to them in the classroom, what they're learning. I always begin class by asking what

students have been thinking about, if anything, from the class before. What stimulated them? How did they take it into their everyday life?

DR: Have you encountered situations where there are just more people whom you are teaching than time allows and that the pedagogy has to change? Or do you stick with the pedagogy no matter what?

bh: I think that pedagogy has to always be, in a sense, improvisational in relationship to who is present, who the audience is, and that one has to be aware of what's possible. In that sense, the teacher as a kind of guru has to be able to intimate early on, step into that space, what needs to be done. I think it's a rare professor who can create in a monological way a sense of community and learning. I believe it is usually that mutual spark between professor and student, or students, that allows for the passion of learning to erupt and spread. Certainly, we are constantly challenged. When I began public lecturing, it became really clear to me that the idea that I could take a fixed lecture and make it work in every location was ridiculous. In fact, there has to be some kind of organic communication between me and the learners. When I give a talk, the audience often has different levels of learners. I just recently gave a talk in my hometown [Hopkinsville, Kentucky] at the community college. You have the people who are coming from an institution where they are taking a course on postmodernism; you have a group of people coming from feminist theory; and then you have my parents and people I went to high school with who just want to see what I'm about. What is the lesson plan that addresses all those people? Usually it's a multiple lesson plan. It's polyvocal. It's not one way that can address, speak, to all those audiences. There's a way in which it is about reading quickly. I think of it as exceptional sports, often like exceptional basketball players, what they do. Yes, there are rules to the game that we all apply. At the same time, one has to have unique moves, plays, strategies that are about addressing the team that you are up against or that you're playing with whether in a noncompetitive way or a competitive way.

DR: That's so important, that organic metaphor, especially in an age where through the side door of technology and online course delivery there's an emphasis, especially among administrators, on instructional design, which is a more prepackaged approach. I know that there's rhetoric of flexibility, but in my experience, such a difference exists between that kind of instructional design and the organic stance that you are talking about.

- bh:** When I first did faculty development with a colleague, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, at Oberlin, we were really surprised to find how open faculty were and that a lot of people simply didn't know what to do. Over the years, I've shared in faculty development simple writing exercises that I use with students. People who didn't think that they could have certain kinds of energies in their classrooms found, "Yes, I can do that; I can have that; it's not something so special or so like you have to be the particularly gifted teacher to do that." That's one reason why faculty development is so crucial. We can move away from the idea that it's individuals' unique gifted qualities that allow them to bring certain skills into the classroom. Rather, there are certain skills that we can all learn together, how to use them, and how to use them while applying our particular personalities and unique styles to those skills because not everybody will be able to do things in the same way.
- DR:** Helping a faculty member to move from a banking model to a learning facilitation model of teaching is probably tantamount in magnitude to that shift from dualism to committed relativism in students. It's a big paradigmatic shift. It strikes me that there's a transition process in this shift that starts with an ending period, where the person realizes that they can't keep teaching in the same old way. Despite all their resistance, they finally realize that their way of teaching is not cutting it, "It's not making me happy; it's not making the students happy; students aren't learning much or well; I've got to change." Typically, they haven't got the new perspective in place and gelled. There's a disorienting neutral zone where they don't have faith in the old paradigm and they can't quite see the new one yet. In the classroom, that's what we help students to do—to make these shifts where the authority comes into the self and they start taking existential responsibility to choose their knowledge. I think that in the profound sense of faculty development that you're talking about, true development, we're helping some faculty members to make a shift of that magnitude. Do you view it that way?
- bh:** Actually, that's one of the tremendously positive gifts that the feminist classroom has given to all of our classrooms across the nation by bringing that personal-is-political element and awakening people to greater awareness of how we can use our persons—our personal histories, experiences—to enhance learning. I think that a lot of professors stuck in the old modes of knowing were able to realize that, "Oh, gee, these alternative ways of knowing are attracting students and giving them energy, and we have to implement some of those ways in our own styles of

teaching.” I think that’s been an important gift from the feminist teacher to the overall classroom that is often not honored. Frequently, male colleagues were threatened by me because students would rather take, for example, my Faulkner class because of the kind of teaching strategies that would be used rather than Faulkner taught by someone else who was using the old banking system. It’s not that as people who like to put down the different modes of knowing and teaching would say, “Oh, it’s easier.” One of the things that people engaged in critical pedagogy and feminist thinking brought to the classroom was the basic idea that learning could be enlivening, that learning would not be this deadening process, would not be boring, but that it in fact would make you want to be more engaged and would lead students to want to be more engaged. I think there are many colleagues who saw that and thought, “Well, I’ll have to try to incorporate some of this into how I do things because I don’t want to be sitting here with no students while they are all in these other classes that are saying to them there is a different way to learn.”

- DR:** A lot of what faculty developers experience is faculty who come in with a kind of banking frame around faculty development: “Just give me the material quick; no liberation here. I just need content quick. I’ve got 20 minutes over lunch. Do a quick presentation, and I’m out of here.” Often, that sits within an administrative context where faculty development efforts need to put up big participation numbers to justify their existence. It’s a structural dynamic that works against this kind of true development, which takes time, is much more labor intensive, takes a lot more effort on the faculty’s part, maybe even takes some release time. In the end, this deep faculty development is much better for the university. However, it takes a while for the university and the person to get the return, and we’re in a culture that has a quick return mentality.
- bh:** In so many ways, what we’re talking about is a teaching of resistance because we implement a lot of these practices within frameworks that are actually structured in such a way that they’re hostile to these practices. But the good thing is that there is always this space that can be made for development and that people will enter. I never hear of any case where a space has opened for faculty development where someone hasn’t chosen to enter that space to grow. That is a positive affirmation of where, in general, teachers are. I think that teachers are wanting to know, “How can I teach in this world of crisis? How can I teach in this world of closed-mindedness? How can I teach in a world where TV is actually

stronger in its pedagogical influence?" We can sit with the facts on paper, and our students will talk back to us from something that they've seen on TV. I think it's that hard wall that has led many more teachers to feel, "I'm open to new development, I'm open to new change because I feel like I'm up against a very difficult space."

DR: Would you talk about these contentious points that are out there now around politics and religion, the blue and the red states, and the cultural wars and so on?

bh: I think this goes back to the future both for faculty development and student growth. We really are going to have to have much more awareness of conflict resolution and how to engage in dialectical exchange without shattering, without falling apart. I still think that the family is the first model of community that many of us know. Within the family, most of us have not seen constructive conflict resolution. We bring that experience into those public domains of our work and our teaching and our learning. I think that the classroom of the future will have to be a far more sophisticated classroom in relation to styles of conflict resolution. How do you teach in a classroom where there are such incredibly divergent belief structures and where people often deal with those differences with aggressive negation as opposed to a spirit of open-mindedness? I think one of the requirements of the classroom to come is the radical openness that I write about in my work because when you have major differences, which we will always have any time you have genuine community, you need to know styles of conflict resolution, of negotiation, of compromise. Most of us do not come either to our graduate education or our teaching profession very well equipped to handle those things.

DR: I find so often that people presume that community means homogeneity, that there are these communities of homogeneity. What you're saying is, I think, rule one is that we as professors and faculty developers need to preach that diversity and pluralism is the basis of true community.

bh: Exactly. There is no community of homogeneity. That is the fiction. And that is the fiction that many of us are wounded within. Whether we are wounded in the fiction that all white people think alike or share in the privilege of whiteness alike, any time that we're not doing the work of sussing out the great diversity that we are learning within, we contribute to that idea that somehow those of us who are in the educational world have transcended difference, have transcended the dirtiness of

difference. In fact, allowing that difference to unfold and using it in the classroom is a major positive tool, if we can learn how to do that. I've been teaching one of my hardest classes at Berea because it involves faculty, staff, students, and community people. The president and provost of our college attend regularly, and their presence has raised the question of how to have an open classroom with open discussion when you have people who are at very different points in the hierarchy present in a setting. When you have, in fact, radically different points of entry, there has to be a level of trust and courage present that one doesn't have to have in a classroom where people are on the same level of educational status, age status. These are courses that are aimed at not just faculty development but our collective development in community. It becomes hard at times. You are going to have radically different tensions, and the question becomes how to utilize those tensions so that we learn more.

DR: And that the tensions aren't bad.

bh: Absolutely.

DR: That it's a good thing actually.

bh: Or even that we get away from that binary of bad/good, but that we recognize tension as creating the energy of growth, as being stimulating, and that in fact it may be "bad" at a given moment in time in terms of how we all experience something in a classroom. In one of my Berea classes, a white woman administrator said that the group she felt least identified with was young black men, and many of the parents of young black males in that room felt very enraged and pissed off. You can't disallow that. We can't say, "Oh, this is going to be a good experience." Because, in fact, it may be a painful experience. She felt misunderstood, or maybe in that moment of spontaneous self-revelation she didn't like what she saw within herself. How do we utilize that? But we can't say it's a good moment. Or don't we feel good in this moment? Actually, don't we all feel like we'd rather be somewhere else in this moment? The question is, how do we step back from those feelings of discomfort, pain, or even grief, and allow that material to be a basis for learning?

DR: From the point of view of trying to help people to facilitate that in groups the objective is to be comfortable with it yourself so that when it comes you don't head for the hills and you do see the value of it.

- bh: I am a big believer that humor is crucial for faculty development in all these settings where we are trying to deal with shifting paradigms. If we can laugh together, if we can laugh even at some of the difficulties, it's very important for creating the space of essential vulnerability that is needed for the construction of community.
- DR: I want to apply this to mentoring now, and particularly among diverse faculty writ large. Many colleges and universities are really interested in developing more effective mentoring programs. You mentioned that you were mentoring a colleague at Berea. It raises the issue of best practices. What training would help mentors to do it better? Issues of cross-racial, cross-gender, cross-identity mentoring come into play here.
- bh: One of the primary skills of mentoring is nurturing growth, and certainly we know in terms of gender studies and feminist studies the low value that we place on nurturing. Mentoring is always such a loaded issue for people because it truly is about nurturing growth. It means a willingness to humble oneself in relationship to someone else, both for the person who may require mentoring and for the mentor who needs to assume a leadership position. I've never wanted to be a leader in my life. It's been hard for me to feel that I have the right or the requirement to assume the role of leader, of guiding someone else. I tend to be much more focused on mutual exchange because I think our old models of mentoring had within them so much dominator-culture power breakdown of servant/served rather than an idea of service that allows for the mutual interplay between teacher/student, mentor/mentee. I think that as we nurture those new models we will hear more about how both people grow in the situation of sharing with the other person.
- DR: I've had trouble with the mentor idea because it is a patriarchal notion from the get-go, from the myth. It does have a power relationship. I like this model that you are talking about, this mutual nurturing model.
- bh: It's reciprocal nurturing. When we use a phrase like *reciprocal mentorship*, we embrace the idea that there is a give and take here, that it's not one person extending to another solely, but that it is about our mutual extension to one another. I've benefited from my colleague who is very junior to me. Her support and her belief in me, even her admiration of me, is important to my acclimatization here where I am a new person. It becomes part of the spirit of welcomeness. That reciprocal nature of interaction allows me to focus on what this person has given to me, as well as what I can, in fact, give to her. To bring into our faculty development

vision notions of reciprocity is crucial as a counter to the old way, which was, let's face it, so much about domination, so much about subordinating yourself to the person in power, not being critical, not angering them. Once again we are in the dysfunctional family, and there can really be no free speech and no questioning of authority. Being able to highlight individuals who are actually using different ways of interaction and how that works is important. So many people are afraid that if they step outside the conventional hierarchy they're going to be misused or mistreated, or they are going to lose authority. And I think that dovetails back to some of your earlier statements about intact self-esteem. If my self-esteem is fully intact, if I am fully actualized, then I can engage in the practice of mutual actualization with others and the community because I am not threatened by the sense that someone can take something away from me. It's just so hard for us because of the way the academy is currently structured. The academy has been so much about people with levels of low psychological self-esteem using power in a dominating way and subordinating others through dehumanization, shaming, goading, one-upping, all of those things. We really have to focus on all of the little places, the little subcultures within, where people are engaged in different practices.

DR: It strikes me that if I were wanting to put together a program that was supportive of diverse faculty, I would pick people, regardless of color, gender, identity, who were nurturing teachers in the sense that we've been speaking about. That whole approach to teaching would translate well in terms of helping a colleague to grow and develop. Do you have thoughts on that?

bh: I think that people's needs are really radically different and that we're better able to mentor or to facilitate growth if we center clearly on what an individual needs. I want to step back from that gender-laden word of nurturing because there are a lot of female faculty who would appear to have "nurturing skills," but those skills may not actually be the skills that facilitate growth in an academic or intellectual setting. Those skills may lead somebody to only want to say good things and not want to say really difficult things. Recently one of my colleagues gave me her tenure self-evaluation to look at, and I felt, okay, do I really look at this and tell her what I think is not adequate or good about it, or do I do a light critique? I asked her, "What do you want? What are you comfortable with?" And in her case, she said, "I really want this to be the best it can be. Go for it!" But I think we're often afraid. We have to talk about honesty because part

of what happens when people are not fully self-actualized is they will often act as though they can receive truth and then in fact be blown away when they are given a truth. I always feel that caution around colleagues who say, "I want to give you this piece of writing to read and critique." You have to be gauging both your willingness to do this but also gauging where they are in their psychological and emotional growth in order to know what can be received.

DR: I want to read to you a quote from Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989):

If you can talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and the right thing to do will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and re-shaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive. (p. 324)

Do you think she got it right?

bh: I think that she got it right for her. I don't presume in any way the presence of oppressive anything in interaction. The assumption that somehow there will always be some kind of something about you that is oppressive to me, which seems to be one of the aspects of the quote, is not something that I would particularly agree with. For me, a big part of dominator thinking has always taught us that with the stranger, with the different, there is always threat. We could equally be saying that with the stranger, with the different, there will always be curiosity, intrigue, and the excitement of mystery. Rather than frame difference in terms of that which threatens or might potentially threaten you and let's both know that, why can't we equally frame difference as intriguing, mysterious, something you will want to seek out. I think about this reframing a lot. When I teach my course and we talk about dominator culture, how do we reframe? If dominator culture has taught us to always and only see difference as threat, how do we begin to reframe that so that we can in fact see difference as something that is positive, that has the potential to be transforming, that difference may be difficult, even painful, but that that will not necessarily lead to a bad ending?

DR: I agree with you totally there. The phrase that Ellsworth used was "potentially oppressive." So it's like a warning to me that I have to remember that when I'm doing something I might be silencing somebody

without even intending to or I might be advantaging somebody over somebody else without intending to.

- bh:** I think that evokes for a lot of people the aura of political correctness, where you're being so careful not to say, do, or behave in any way that could be harmful, which I think has resulted for a lot of people in greater paralysis and passivity. Rather than engaging in certain kinds of difficult dialogue and exchanges, people just shut down because they feel it's too much work not to say anything that will offend anyone. Going back to humor, my humor is often "off" for my students. They don't quite get it, but I can't worry all the time about that. What we can laugh about is that they are not getting it as something they think is funny and that can be a point of commonality for us. What is sad is that so many people have forsaken the path of resistance to dominator culture precisely because they fear being controlled by the specter of political correctness: "I don't want to hurt anybody. So I won't even join the discussion. But also, I don't want to be hurt." Instead, we need to frame it that here we are, capable of taking care of ourselves, that in genuine community, which requires vulnerability, yes, there may be occasions in which people feel hurt. For example, in 2004 I taught a group of faculty, staff, and students, and one black student said, "Oh, I was out in Wal-Mart and this white woman asked me if I worked there." The black student saw this as racist, and she was very angered by it. I said, "Well, given the history of the civil rights struggle, if all you have to worry about in terms of racism is somebody thinking you work at Wal-Mart, you're really quite fortunate." But that did not go over well in the classroom. It was perceived that I was not being sensitive to her pain. But I was trying to get her to contextualize her pain and realize that people sometimes focus on small things and see them as having far greater weight than they should have in the scheme of things. Again, I think that's where so much fear of political correctness comes in because just challenging that person, momentarily, I felt I lost her, by not addressing her, "Yes, I understand that was awful for you," but instead really saying, "Well, come on, let's ask ourselves, can we really compare that to people sitting at Woolworth counters while people are spitting on them and threatening to kill them and arresting them?" We can put it into perspective and not lose our sense of proportion in relationship to domination even as we do hold people accountable for racism, for racist perspectives, and the like. Those are essential things that we need to talk about in faculty development because I think these are all the issues that faculty grapple

with beyond diversity alone. The vast majority of our classes are not diverse racially. The vast majority of classes are white, and our faculties are predominantly white. But some of the same issues prevail: Who are we in that classroom and how do we deal with the differences of opinion and values that come up in that classroom setting? It's been easy for white faculty to presume a sameness in the all-white classroom that is really not there, and it can be unacknowledged if space is not made for that difference to speak itself.

DR: Sometimes, a slim line exists between feeling heard and feeling exposed. You ask your students to write reflectively and then to read aloud in class often or to speak about what they've been thinking. Also, you model it as a teacher; you disclose as a teacher. Would you talk a little about this teaching practice?

bh: I think, one, it's important to let students know what is required at the very beginning so that in choosing that class they are choosing to participate in those acts of self-revelation, so that it does not become something they didn't feel they should be required to do or they don't want to do. I've had students who choose and then still refuse. Then I have to let them know they're failing this part of their grade. But that's their choice. I am not going to try to force them to participate, but I would like them to know that this is what's required of them and of myself. We're constantly going back to the issue of self-responsibility and accountability. So much of what happens in the classroom as it is currently structured is the students' desire to be passive and to feel acted upon. Part of our enormous challenge as critical pedagogues, as people who want to teach liberation, is to first break through that idea of their passivity as a student, as someone who is without control over their destiny in the classroom, and to create that sense that they indeed are in control of their destiny. Oftentimes, I encourage students to grade themselves and then to come to me and talk about the grade. That level of self-monitoring and self-evaluation takes away that sense of the dominating teacher versus the subordinated student.

DR: As I hear you talk about your approach to teaching, it seems to me that it applies directly to faculty development work with colleagues, of trying to encourage them to see that they can take more direction in their own development. The parallels are striking to me.

bh: But that's because I think that we have to reframe our thinking about where learning takes place. In the courses that I teach that involve faculty,

staff, and students, one of the first things we talk about is that learning does not simply take place in the classroom. It is also taking place in how we conduct ourselves with one another as administrators, in how I conduct myself if I'm the chair when someone who has lesser rank comes into my office. We need to view all those interactions as part of learning. Part of what's unique about Berea College is that we are governed by great commitments. One—impartial love—is the theme of my class this semester. How do we really show impartial love in our interactions and beyond the classroom? I think that we need to begin to teach faculty, administrators, and staff that learning isn't just taking place in the classroom, and service isn't just taking place in the classroom, but it's also taking place in the myriad ways in which we conduct ourselves in our actions outside the classroom. When I first met Paolo Friere, it wasn't what he was doing in the classroom or on the stage as a lecturer, but how he conducted himself as an individual where I saw him living out the truth of his theory that was so amazing and so impressive to me—and so challenging. I wanted to know how to do that, how to be that liberating teacher, whether I'm in the classroom, or whether I am going in to speak with the secretary, or whether I am going in to speak with one of the janitorial people who are busy pushing a mop as I am headed to my classroom at 8:30 in the morning. I think that is a challenge of the classroom of the future in extending the vision that development isn't just about the classroom, isn't just about faculty and students, but about our collective interaction with one another as communities of learning.

DR: Excellent.

bh: And let me just say that we particularly see that on those campuses where presidents are very proactive in promoting discussion and allowing for dissent. It is happening in many places, often not at the public ivies or the private ivies but at other schools where people are simply trying to do the right thing, to create spaces of humane and marvelous learning. Often you find administrators in those settings who are willing to dare to be different, whose own experiences are governed by affirmative values about how we should interact with one another. And so faculty development is always happening in a parallel way to what we are expecting of students in the classroom.

DR: That's excellent. It's not marginalized. It's at the center of the endeavor, and the formal leader at the top is exemplifying the same value that is being worked out in the classroom. There's alignment and consistency.

Wonderfully said. About this idea of where you have worked, I want to close our dialogue with a different line of conversation. It seems to me that you've not only lived a career of engaged pedagogy but also of engaged scholarship. You've worked long and hard as a public intellectual who struggles with problems of direct relevance to much larger communities than narrow disciplinary niches. You've commented about being an intellectual in an anti-intellectual society, and you have also made a clear distinction between being an academic and an intellectual. You've noted that your experiences taught you that being an intellectual in an academic institution, such as a university, is not always a good fit, notwithstanding the life-of-the-mind rhetoric of most colleges and universities. Can you comment on the supportiveness of the American academy for public intellectuals who practice engaged scholarship? What could be done to make colleges and universities more supportive of this kind of work? Do faculty developers have any role in helping to support engaged scholarship?

- bh: I, myself, would not use the term *public intellectual*. I have no negative thoughts about it, but it's not something I've ever really felt like, "Oh, this represents me." I think usually when people use that term what they mean is, "I'm an intellectual who has been very committed to service and service outside the academy." When we talk about the future and the appreciation of academic intellectuals, we really have to talk about greater unity between learning institutions and the communities surrounding those institutions. There will be a diminishment of the value of even being at a college or university in the future if we don't have a greater effort to unite theory with practice beyond the academy. Then we will see the academic as someone useful to society beyond what they're doing in their classroom setting or their specific scholarship that 10 people may read. It's interesting that popular films like *A Beautiful Mind* or even *What the Bleep Do We Know?* have become examples of how that can be done. I mean, think of all those scientists that people are listening to in the film *What the Bleep Do We Know?* It's kind of amazing when you see just ordinary people looking at this film and learning from people that it would never have occurred to them to think, "Oh, okay, this particular physicist will have something to say to me as an ordinary person." That kind of bringing of intellectual, academic work into a public arena allows everyday people to recognize that this work contributes to the quality of their lives. Part of the tragedy, I think, of our times in our nation and in a cultural pedagogy that is

ruled by conservative media is that we really exist with a lot of ignorance. It's important to cut through that arrogant ignorance. It's not just that it's ignorance. It's that there's an arrogance about it, that we don't have to know things to rule the world. I think that we will have to make great efforts as teachers, as administrators, to bring back some valuation to knowing—to knowledge itself, which means working to create better links among public schools, high schools, and university settings. Why don't we ever think about rewarding faculty development that is about going outside the university into other kinds of schools? I do a lot of programs with public libraries because I think that the public library remains one of the great bastions of where alternative ways of knowing are accessible, free to all. The most intense pedagogical challenges of my career have been those challenges that take place outside the privileged setting of the academy. Recently I did a part of a literacy program in Chicago, going to the south side of Chicago and poor neighborhoods, reading books with kids, and talking about critical thinking. I remember entering that setting, and I could palpably feel the level of suspicion directed at me because I didn't look like how a famous person should look. I didn't carry myself in a dominator-culture mode, which is how most people understand celebrity. Those challenges of moving our work and seeing our work as being relevant to a world beyond the academy are part of faculty development too, and are, I think, extraordinarily neglected.

DR: Do you think that the sense of doing something that's useful for specific communities and for larger societies is a particular burden of the public university or is it one that extends to both public and private practice?

bh: To me, it extends to all people who are engaged in practices of critical pedagogy and learning. It's just really exciting. I wish that I could adequately describe the difference between writing an important piece of literary criticism that very few people read and writing something where people feel like this utterly transformed their life. Once you do the other it's almost like the difference between sitting at a computer playing a basketball game and actually being on a basketball court, playing, having your whole body engaged, extending itself, growing. It's just such an awesome, wonderful feeling of that work you do. I'm sometimes shy of the term *public intellectual* because what always amazes me is the little laboratory of ideas that I work within is often a space that is so private, so solitary, and often so lonely. That those ideas can move out beyond that solitary space into an incredible world and be influential is for me the

awesome quality of what one can do as a thinker, writer, intellectual, and not, in fact, that somehow one starts out in some public arena and you're testing everything there. Things are not tested there. They're not formed there. They're formed in the silences and in the space of critical reflection and contemplative practice.

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