

Earth Rising

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This picture changed the world. Captured by the astronauts of Apollo 8, it was the first time humans saw planet earth beyond the confines of what lay under their own feet. This picture is credited with sparking the environmental movement, and has since become an iconic image used as a symbol of global unity during peace rallies and global health initiatives (Cosgrove, 1994). Although having arguably less momentous an impact, it also changed the way I think about my work with students.

For the past two years, I have advised the Interfraternity Council executive board, a group of six college men elected to govern the fraternity community at the University of Vermont (UVM). Coming from a background in new student orientation, this position was the first time I have worked with such a homogenous group of students in terms of gender and racial identity. One of the executive board's biggest projects has been to continue the sexual assault prevention initiatives started by the previous board. As a biracial woman attempting to advise and help educate a group of mostly white men about the sensitive issue of sexual assault, I faced some challenges.

As their advisor, I engaged in messy conversations with the students as they stumbled through their understanding of rape culture, and what they could do that might actually make change. At times I was met with resistance, and they were not always the most sensitive, understanding, or patient in their learning. There were moments where many of those things triggered me in an infuriating, emotional way. In addition, I started to notice the stark difference between how the men responded to me, as opposed to the male colleagues I invited to speak with them. To be the lone woman in a room of men discussing gender dynamics was not always easy. I felt frustrated and useless, and the words of another UVM colleague were hanging in the back of my mind: "it seems problematic this group of men is being advised by a woman." I began to doubt myself – could I really be a good advisor to them? How could I help

them learn if I could not find it within myself to be patient with them? Where would I find the strength to continue this work?

These feelings may be familiar to you as well. I am confident I am not the only person to find myself struggling as I navigate dominance. Whether through gender or other historically subordinated identities, playing the role of educator is a challenge, particularly when student learning comes at your own expense. In order for me to sustain myself doing this work, I began to explore the literature about resistance in social justice education, and I was encouraged to shift my perspective. In my frustration, I blamed the “psyche of [my] student[s]” (Goodman, 2011, p. 65) for their resistance, when in reality their behavior was more reflective of the socio-political realities in which we all live. The resistance, insensitivities, and overall way the men were thinking is a result of social conditioning as part of a larger system of privilege that, “create[s] and reinforce[s] worldviews and ways of acting that undermine an openness to true democracy and equity” (p. 53). In my triggered state of mind, all I could see was a person who had emotionally harmed me; when I reframed my perspective, however, I saw a systematic issue, a potential ally for change, and a necessity for patience. Moving my understanding from my head to my heart was the difficult part.

At the same time that I must remind myself to keep perspective, it is also important for me to name the value in honoring my emotional reaction. The need for empathy and understanding when working with the students’ inevitable resistance does not eliminate the fact I have feelings. My lived experience is real, and I find my work is best when I bring my whole heart to it, not just the most logical pieces. I believe we as professionals do not always give ourselves enough grace to be human. Self-preservation is essential to sustaining ourselves in our work, and should not be discounted.

The picture of the earth rising is my mechanism for bridging the gap between my head and my heart. As jarring moments come, I recognize my reaction, take a deep breath, plant my feet solidly on the floor, and remember the picture of the earth rising. It serves as a reminder there is more to this story than what lies immediately under my feet. Think bigger, Lian, you’ve got a world to change.

References

Cosgrove, D. (1994) "Contested global visions: one-world, whole-earth, and the Apollo space photographs." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 84(2), 270-294.

Goodman, D. J. (2011). *Promoting diversity and social justice: educating people from privileged groups* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.