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Can You Love Them Enough to Help Them Learn?: Reflections of a Social Justice Educator on Addressing Resistance from White Students to Anti-Racism Education

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on the question "Can you love them enough to help them learn?" as a social justice educator. I offer my interpretation of what it means to "love people enough to help them learn" and discuss what this orientation may look like in practice, especially in reference to reducing resistance from white students to antiracism education. Some of the challenges and nuances of this approach are addressed. While this article focuses on antiracism work with white people in formal educational contexts (classrooms and workshops), this orientation can be applicable beyond these parameters.

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"Can you love them enough to help them learn?" I heard this question several years ago in a talk by Pat Romney, organizational diversity consultant. Pat was asked this by her mentor, Leroy Williams, when she was struggling through working with a group.[i] I have been haunted by the question ever since, because it so succinctly and powerfully captures the essence of effective social justice education. It asks me to confront the ways I am or am not able to love my students enough, especially when I find it challenging to do so. While I have long thought about the reasons for and strategies to reduce white resistance (Goodman, 2001/2011), this question shifts the lens from the learner to me, the educator. The focus is not on "what's wrong with the student" but on my attitudes and behaviors that are affecting the educational dynamic between us.

Asking, "Can you love them enough to help them learn?" reflects my belief that compassion and relationship are at the heart of successfully educating whites[ii] about racism and other forms of social inequality. In the 30 years I have been a social justice educator, I have come to believe that if people feel seen and heard, cared about and respected, they are more likely to be open to this process. If they trust me as their instructor/facilitator, they are more likely to come on this educational journey that asks them to consider new ways of understanding themselves, other people, and the world. I am not referring to being "nice" or keeping people "comfortable," but to creating meaningful connections with individuals that can promote growth and learning.

In this essay, I offer my interpretation of what it means to "love people enough to help them learn" and explain what this orientation may look like in practice, especially in reference to reducing resistance from white students to antiracism education.[iii] I describe some situations that illustrate both the strengths and limitations of this approach. Next, I address some of the challenges of this orientation and how my identity as a white woman shapes my relationships and dynamics with white students in ways that might be different for educators of color. (Both Pat Romney and Leroy Williams are African American.) While there certainly can be resistance to exploring race and racism from people of color, my discussion focuses on white students. Some of the sources of the resistance from people of color and ways to work with the resistance may be different than for white students, especially as a white instructor. In addition, this article discusses antiracism work in formal educational settings (classrooms and workshops), though I believe these approaches can be applicable beyond these parameters and encourage readers to consider what might be useful in other contexts and with other issues.

Setting the Stage

Before I explore the meaning and application of "loving them enough," I want to address a couple of related issues. One is how I define resistance. Antiracism/social justice education asks people to consider information and perspectives that challenge their self-concepts and worldviews. I see resistance as the inability or unwillingness to engage in critical self-reflection and to reevaluate currently held views. It is not simply having a different opinion, questioning, or ignorance, especially if there is a willingness and intent to learn. Resistance is rooted in fear and anxiety.

People become defensive and resistant when they feel too threatened. I have increasingly come to appreciate how unsettling social justice education can be and how much it can turn people's worlds upside down—it asks them to reconsider fundamental beliefs and creates potential ruptures in their important relationships. My goal as a social justice educator is to get students to *engage* in the process of exploration and learning. If they shut down, check-out (physically, intellectually, or emotionally), or continually fight back, there is little opportunity for growth and change.

A second issue related to social justice education and resistance is the importance of the classroom community. Like many other educators, I think a lot about how to create a classroom environment that is inclusive and respectful (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Vaccaro, 2013). Before I focus on my specific role as educator, I want to highlight the necessity of creating trust in the group as a whole, and building relationships among students to support each other's learning. Guidelines for engagement ensure that everyone agrees to, and takes responsibility for, how they will participate together. Group-building activities and work in pairs and small groups allow for trust and relationships to be established and strengthened. I have repeatedly seen the value in establishing connections and a positive tone as early as possible to defuse potential resistance. The climate and dynamics of the learning community are of critical importance and I pay a lot of attention to cultivating productive ones throughout the class/session. However, I cannot underestimate my impact as the teacher/facilitator. I have a strong role in setting the climate and modeling the behaviors I hope to encourage in students. Ultimately, I have responsibility for the educational process and am the likely target of the resistance.

What Does It Mean to Love Them Enough to Help Them Learn?

Even if I create conditions ripe for learning, I still need to look at how I actually feel and behave. So what does it mean for me to love them enough to help them learn? As bell hooks (2001) writes, referencing Parker Palmer, "love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (p. 10). What does it look like when I try to love white students enough in antiracism education, and how might that help reduce their resistance? Below I describe some of the ways I try to express this compassion and respect and in turn engender their constructive engagement.

1. *Seeing their full humanity*. One component of loving them enough is the ability to see people's full humanity and not reduce them to particular labels or stereotypes. It is easy for me to make assumptions about individuals based on their appearance or perceived social identities. More than once, I have assumed that people like the pony-tailed, Birkenstock-wearing, middle-aged white male art professor would be right on board with the class content while the baseball-cap-wearing, young, white male athlete with a crew cut might be more of a challenge. Not only have I been proven completely wrong, I have failed to see past these aspects of who they were and the judgments I made about them to see their full complexity as human beings. When students express particular views, I need to resist labeling them as a certain "type." Loving them enough means not getting hooked into limited ways of seeing them based simply on how they appear, some statements they make, or behaviors they

exhibit. It is being curious about who they are, what they care about, their vulnerabilities, and their needs and interests. When I can have this perspective, it helps me see some white students as more than just the embodiment of privilege and entitlement.

Making personal connections with individuals often allows me to see their humanity and for them to see mine, since I know they are making assumptions and judgments about me as well. I will especially make an effort to connect with people who appear to be resistant or with whom I have trouble relating. I will reach out before or after a class/session, during breaks, etc., to talk with them and/or create a dialogue through their papers or online. Making the human connection and fostering a relationship often does wonders for breaking down the barriers that impede a constructive educational relationship. We are less likely to see each other in only one-dimensional ways.

2. *Affirming positive qualities.* Relatedly, I try to affirm who my students are and recognize their basic goodness. Most individuals think of themselves as good and caring people. I seek to call forth their inclination for fairness and their caring qualities in a variety of ways. For example, I may ask them to identify things they appreciate about their various social identities, their personal strengths, or a way they supported diversity and inclusion. These types of activities and discussions help students feel affirmed and acknowledged in positive ways. I also try to recognize their good intentions even when I believe their thoughts or actions may be misguided, such as when white students insist that we should be color-blind or try to be the "savior" to people of color.

Affirmation is also linked to avoiding shame and blame. Many white people enter antiracism/social justice educational experiences anticipating that they will be judged and demonized. These feelings and expectations set up resistance. I try to allay these concerns at the beginning of a class or workshop by sharing some of my assumptions about social justice education: for example, that it is not our fault for the systems of inequality that historically or currently exist, or for lacking information, or for having misinformation; that we are not bad people for having particular social identities (e.g., being a straight, white man); and that we are not trying to just flip the oppressor/oppressed roles, but instead ensure that *all* people are safe and treated fairly and with respect. I emphasize the need to understand our cultural conditioning and how we are impacted by structural inequality and to figure out our role and responsibility in creating greater equity.

Other ways I affirm people is by recognizing and valuing their current knowledge and competencies and the constructive ways they engage in the class. Instead of assuming that white people have no relevant knowledge or experience, I try to uncover and build on what they know. I look for the pieces of truth in what they are saying and highlight that, even if other parts of what they are expressing reflect inaccurate information and needs to be addressed. I appreciate the risks people take in class in their willingness to ask questions, their honesty in discussing an issue or sharing an experience, or their sensitivity in responding to another student.

3. *Listening without judgment.* In order for people to feel respected, I must try to listen deeply and without judging them as persons. This does not mean that I need to

agree with what they are saying or to let their comments go unexplored, but I need to attempt to grasp what they are expressing. I find it easier to be nonjudgmental when I remind myself that individuals are not to blame for having absorbed misinformation, stereotypes, or the myths of meritocracy and equal opportunity from the dominant culture. Additionally, white people have rarely had the opportunity to seriously analyze racial issues and explore other perspectives. Yet, I find it challenging to listen nonjudgmentally in regular life, no less so when I am listening to views I find inaccurate or offensive. Deeply listening not only communicates positive regard for the speakers, but also allows me to better understand their thinking, which can assist me in developing more effective educational responses.

4. Acknowledging their reality. One way people feel seen and heard is when I can accurately reflect their feelings, experiences, and perspectives. If I have listened deeply, I can convey to them that I understand what they have said, or if I have not, they can correct me. Acknowledging is not agreeing, but simply recognizing their reality. When individuals feel misunderstood, slighted, or ignored, they will often keep vying for recognition and not listen to or care about others. Understanding this dynamic is especially relevant when white people are expressing experiences of pain or unfairness. Acknowledging their perspective first often helps them be more open to listening and learning.

The ability to listen without judgment and let people know they are heard can be challenging to develop and maintain. During a role play in a workshop I was leading on skills for facilitating discussions on diversity, I asked the "facilitator" to acknowledge or paraphrase what the "student" had said before offering more information or challenging the student's statement. Many of the workshop participants remarked how hard it was to paraphrase first, especially when they heard provocative remarks. They immediately wanted to jump into telling the student how the student was wrong. As an educator, loving them enough means being able to listen to and acknowledge another person's views and experiences even when it is difficult to do so.

5. *Empathizing with their experiences.* Beyond listening and acknowledging is the ability to be empathic, to relate to others' experiences and to see the world from their perspective. I try to appreciate how these white students have come to think and act as they do. What is it about their life experiences and cultural conditioning that has led them to these views and feelings? What is at stake for them in their resistance to this antiracist material? Contemplating these questions is most useful when I can be curious rather than judgmental. When I am not feeling too irritated, it can be an intriguing puzzle to try to understand what is going on for different people.

I can be more empathic when I can personally relate to the feelings and experiences of the white individuals in my class or workshop. This is where humility is really valuable. I can easily connect to being and feeling ignorant, scared, defensive, oblivious, incompetent, guilty, entitled, angry, condescending, overwhelmed (and on and on) in the course of my ongoing process to learn about racism and other forms of oppression. The more I can think about how that was or could be me, the more empathy I can express. In my classes, I often tell stories from my own life about my efforts to unlearn racism (and other systems of

inequality) and to work for racial/social justice in order to build empathic connections.

Another way I try to empathize, especially with white people who may be resistant, is to imagine what it might be like for them to be in the class or workshop and to remember my own defensive reactions in similar situations. I do an exercise with educators where I ask them to think of a time when they became defensive, especially involving a diversity-related issue where they were part of the privileged group. In a guided imagery, I ask them to recall what the other person did that elicited their defensive reaction, how they felt, how they behaved, and what they would have preferred the other person to have done. I list their responses to each question on the board. People frequently report that they got defensive when they felt they were not being listened to or understood, were being blamed, were made to feel stupid, and were told they were wrong. They often reacted with anger, argued back, physically left, and emotionally disengaged. I then ask them to view the lists from the perspective of a student in their class. They readily notice the parallels between their perceptions and reactions and those of their students.

6. *Validating their feelings.* Loving them enough can also entail validating people's feelings, which can help them stay engaged. There are many emotions that commonly occur for white students in the course of antiracism education. If these feelings are normalized, individuals can better accept their reactions and realize that other people have also felt these emotions. I recognize that exploring these issues can be hard work and that many feelings can arise. I encourage people to "hang in there" even when they are uncomfortable. I also hold out that as they continue the process, they can get to a place where it can feel liberating and not just painful.[iv]

To prepare students to witness and experience emotions, at the beginning of a class, I will often describe some of the reactions people may have throughout the course, such as guilt, confusion, anger, and defensiveness, and ask students to think about how they might handle these feelings so they can continue to remain constructively engaged. During a class or workshop when we are dealing with especially difficult material, I will acknowledge that this is a time when particular emotions may arise. I will check in with students and to see how they are feeling, sometimes asking for a raise of hands so they can see that others share their experience. By naming and normalizing what they may be encountering, it helps them see that these feelings are to be expected, and can be worked through. This enables them to better deal with the discomfort.

7. *Respecting their commitment and courage*. Finally, I feel it is important to convey respect for the courage and commitment it takes for individuals to explore sensitive and controversial issues, to engage in difficult self-examination, and to be willing to change. As I discussed previously, truly engaging in antiracism/social justice education is not an easy or simple endeavor. While white people *should* address racism, in reality they (we) can often choose to just go through the motions, walk away from racial issues, or try to avoid race-related topics completely. I let students know that I value their willingness to do the hard work, stay committed to the process, alter what they say or do, and take risks to confront racism.

Further Clarifications

So far, I have tried to describe what I think "loving them enough to help them learn" is. Now, let me be clear about what "loving them enough" is *not.* It's not about being "nice," allowing inaccurate information to go uncorrected, letting assumptions go unchallenged, or permitting students to create a harmful, toxic environment. People still need to be accountable for their words and behavior. Loving them enough is not about making white people feel better about being racist. It is done in order to help them understand racism, examine their white privilege, and develop the commitment and competency to promote racial justice. Educators still need to enforce the group guidelines, prevent anyone from dominating or derailing the class, set time limits on discussions, reframe comments to address relevant issues, and all the other things we do to ensure an equitable, inclusive, and constructive learning environment.

Loving them enough to help them learn is what allows me to most effectively challenge white students and have them be uncomfortable but remain in the educational process. It is when I can most powerfully educate for racial/social justice. If I feel compassionate and respectful, I can better trust my own responses. I am less likely to get hooked into power struggles with a student and try to "win" an argument. I feel more confident that I will not be acting from a place of anger and judgment and that my humor (which tends to be a bit sarcastic—a cultural trait) will not be mean-spirited. My actions will also more likely be received as they are intended, as trying to be constructive, not destructive. When there is a bond between me and the student, both of us can trust my intentions. I can push the hardest when there is a rapport, when we both know that I am not being hostile or attacking, when we both recognize that I am motivated by my care for her/him/hir and my passion for social justice. When I do not trust myself, I tend to hold back and thus am less educationally effective.

Some Illustrations

I have described in more general terms what it means to love them enough to help them learn. I now share some specific situations to illustrate what this approach has looked like and its efficacy in different contexts. To be clear, being compassionate and respectful is not a magic answer to eliminate all resistance. It is more a way of being than a specific set of actions. However, in these examples, I attempt to elucidate how I have tried to use compassion and respect and the results of my efforts.

I was teaching a graduate education class on Issues of Racism and Sexism in Education (that fulfilled a diversity requirement) that met for six day-long Saturday sessions throughout a semester. About three-quarters of the class of 25 students were in their twenties or early thirties, while the rest were around 40 and older. Joe (a pseudonym) was a middle-aged, white man who identified strongly as Italian American. He told us he grew up in a working-class Italian immigrant family that openly expressed racist views, and that his father continued to do so to this day. Joe had adolescent children and was making a career change to being a middle/high school teacher. He was currently teaching in a school that was predominantly Latino and lower income.

From the beginning, I could feel Joe's skepticism about the class in his questions, comments, and body language. During breaks, I made an effort to speak

with him, initially just general chit-chat. I, too, was middle-aged (a bit older than he) and also had two children who were approaching adolescence. Gradually, he talked more about his kids and other concerns. Joe was deeply committed to raising "good kids" and we talked about the challenges in doing so. He wanted to be a good teacher. As he struggled with letting go of some of his internalized racist ideology, I continually affirmed his desire to be a good parent and teacher and how this class would help him in that quest. I could feel that Joe was gradually seeing me as a credible and trusted ally in this difficult process. He would later acknowledge as much. In class and in our private conversations, he would share his struggles with reconciling what we were learning in the course about white privilege and structural racism with some of the behaviors he was seeing from the students in his high school class and the larger community. Joe grappled with looking at his stereotypes and his tendency to "blame the victim." He expressed the common sentiment that if his poor Italian immigrant family worked hard to make it in the United States, why couldn't other racial groups. In response, I affirmed that he could in fact be proud of the hard work of his family and the gains they have made. In light of what we had been studying in class, I asked him to consider what made it possible for his family to obtain the rewards of their efforts, and how this might be different for families of color. Through conversation, responses to him in class, comments on his papers, and e-mails, I acknowledged how challenging this process was for him and how much I respected his willingness to hang in there and keep reevaluating and reflecting. He had little support in his life for doing so, and in fact faced hostility from his parents. At the end of the class, Joe still struggled with what to believe and how to integrate this new knowledge into his life. But he had worked hard—emotionally and intellectually. He had engaged in honest and thoughtful discussions in the class and did some difficult self-reflection. This course was just one piece of his journey, but he was willing to travel the road with me and the class. I have no doubt that if Joe and I had not developed the connection we did and the class was not as supportive as it was, he would not have come that far.

In another semester of the same graduate class on Racism and Sexism in Education, I had a student I will call Ashley. She was in her early twenties, blonde, and wore lots of make-up and stylish clothes. I recognized that she elicited my stereotypes of young women who looked like her and wondered how open and serious she would be about this material. I therefore tried to be careful about making assumptions and to see her for who she really was. In class she shared how she came from a very traditional family from a local community. Based on body language and questions and comments in class, I could see she was struggling with believing the material that addressed white privilege and institutional racism, and was feeling that these topics were an affront to her and her family. Ashley seemed to feel that we were saying that she and her family (and other white people) were "racist," bad people. While I never developed a strong personal relationship with her, I was intentional about affirming her feelings and countering her interpretation, which other people in the class shared. I tried to maintain a respectful and compassionate tone. I spoke a lot about structural racism and how the system has been set up to benefit white people regardless of one's personal beliefs. I talked about how I certainly felt that I was a good caring person (like most other white people), but realized that I had internalized negative and inaccurate racial messages.

Moreover, I recognized that I was advantaged by racism even though I tried to be fair and equitable in my life and did not want privileges that were denied to others. By being able to empathize with her emotions and struggles, I believe she was better able to hear and accept the information and not feel personally attacked; she could recognize the larger societal dynamics at play. By the end of the class, she was able to shift to a more systemic analysis and was concerned about addressing racism and other inequities in her school and larger community.

I often find that my efforts to love them enough are less effective and insufficient in short sessions with larger groups when there is limited opportunity to develop personal rapport or to work through issues. In a 90-minute training with a group of about 75 student leaders, some young white males challenged my statement that one way to create greater equity was to support the leadership of people from marginalized groups. They interpreted my remarks as saying that white people should not be in leadership roles and that you should indiscriminately support a person of color. I tried to respond in a respectful tone, recognizing their perspective, and correcting their misinterpretation. I heard afterwards from a staff member that these students still felt that I was discriminating against white males. Clearly, we needed more time to address this issue. At a minimum, in these and other situations where there is inadequate time to really grapple with the challenges and complexity of the content and dynamics, I hope that people feel that their view was acknowledged and that they were treated respectfully. I try to model that we can talk about racial issues in civil and considerate ways. My desire is that they will remain open to further exploration of the subject at another time.

The Challenge of Loving Them Enough

Of course it is much easier to love them enough to help them learn when people are open and receptive. Even so, I can rarely love my students fully. The question asks, "Can you love them *enough* to help them learn?" It is not suggesting that we must love individuals completely or perfectly in order to educate them well. And, the question centers on the love needed to help them *learn* (not do any other number of things). There are parameters and limits to what is being asked of us. Nonetheless, it can be hard. But it is exactly at those times when I cannot muster the needed compassion and respect that this question helps me refocus my energy or as Romney suggests "encourages me to higher ground" (p. 71).

As Parker Palmer (2007) describes, "The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able, so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living require" (p. 11). Fortunately, over the many years of doing this work, I have found it increasingly easier to love them enough, whether due to my own personal maturity, social identity development, professional experience, spiritual practice, or other factors. Nonetheless, it still takes thought, effort, patience, and perseverance.

The real test of my ability to be compassionate and respectful is when I encounter individuals who either display overt resistance or enact attitudes and behaviors that get under my skin. As much as I strive to love them enough to help them learn, there are times when I cannot do so sufficiently, I cannot get out of my negative judgments, I just do not like them, or I

cannot figure out how to break through and connect with them. What can I do when I am not feeling the love? In the moment, I may try to breathe and state what I am noticing about their behavior (as objectively as I can). I may ask questions as opposed to trying to convince them or defend myself, or I may acknowledge what they are saying and ask for other comments from the group. Sometimes I will decide to move on or come back to their comment at a later point. When I have more time, I will look at what is going on with me. What's preventing me from loving them enough? Why am I having this reaction to them? Usually conversations with friends and colleagues help me sort out how I am feeling and why, figure out what may be going on for the other individual, and strategize about how to proceed. When possible, I will usually try to get to know the person better so we both can see each other more fully. I will pull out my resources on social justice pedagogy, nonviolent communication, mindfulness meditation, and teachings on compassion.

Differences in Race and Role

Educators of color, especially women of color and others with additional marginalized identities who do antiracism/social justice education with white people, frequently confront a host of obstacles that I as a white person do not routinely face. Instructors of color may face students who question their authority, challenge their competency, think they are pushing their own agenda, assume they are being oversensitive, and give them poorer evaluations (Boatright-Horowitz, & Soeung, 2009; Reid, 2010). In addition, they frequently face a lack of institutional support and are often "presumed incompetent" (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Neimann, González, & Harris, 2012). It becomes an extraordinary feat at times for educators of color (especially those with other subordinated identities) to have the internal and external capacity to be compassionate and respectful when working with white students on racism.

I have also heard uneasiness from people of color about replicating the oppressive power dynamics that occur in the larger society—that they are once again expected to take care of white people and see things from their perspective. I can understand how people of color might interpret it as such and have that concern. Certainly the goal is not to reinforce destructive and dehumanizing patterns of behaviors, nor do I think this situation needs to be the result. While not the same, I think about my experience educating men about sexism. When I truly feel that I can love them enough to help them learn, I experience it as coming from a place of strength and centeredness, not subordination or subservience. I use this educational approach not only because it is consistent with my values, but because I find it works. It moves people away from resistance and towards understanding and dismantling privilege and oppression. It also creates a more satisfying and joyful teaching experience.

In my readings of and conversations with many highly capable social justice educators of various racial backgrounds (e.g., hooks, 2010; Okun, 2010), a common theme has been the value and effectiveness of being able to love them enough to help them learn (or some similar sentiment). As noted earlier, both Pat Romney and her mentor Leroy Williams, who asked this of her, are black. Clearly, I have found this question valuable, but educators need to consider for themselves if and how it resonates with them and what this means for their practice.

Moreover, I make a distinction between my professional educator role and my every day citizen role. Even though I strive to live my life in a way that treats people with compassion and respect, I do not feel I need to nor am I able to be the perpetual educator. I do not invest the same time and energy with every individual I come across as I do with my students. When I have chosen to be in the role of educator, and this is my accepted responsibility (and for which I often get paid), I believe I have a personal and professional obligation to do my best to help students learn and grow (within reasonable boundaries.) I do not believe (nor expect from others) that I must do this with everyone I meet.

"Loving them enough to help them learn" is not sufficient in and of itself for successful antiracism/social justice education. There are many valuable educational approaches and strategies to reduce resistance and create powerful learning experiences. Yet, all the wonderful pedagogical tools and activities are likely to be more effective if they are built on a foundation of compassion, trust, and respect—if I can love them enough to help them learn.

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[i] Pat Romney has written about her reflections on this question in Romney, P. (2000). Can You Love Them Enough? Organizational Consulting as a Spiritual Quest. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, Haworth Press, Inc. 11(4): 65-81.

[ii] I have chosen not to capitalize the terms *white*, *black* and *people of color* since these are socially constructed categories and not actual ethnic identifications, though I realize people have difference views on this issue.

[iii] While I use the term *student*, I am referring more generally to individuals who attend my classes or workshops.

[iv] In the chapter, The Joy of Unlearning Privilege/Oppression (Goodman, 2011), I discuss the many ways engaging in a meaningful process of unlearning racism and other forms of oppression can be liberating and healing for people from privileged groups.

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