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Continuing Derrick Bell's Devotion in Creative Action

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Continuing Derrick Bell's Devotion in Creative Action (Prof. Angela Kupenda)

By Sahar F. Aziz

I remember my first time seeing Derrick Bell in person and hearing him speak, just a few years before he passed away. I was in awe of him for many reasons, but primarily for two reasons. First, I noted from watching him with his devoted students, how mutual was the devotion coming from him—devotion to them as people and as those who would surely carry on his great work of seeking to forge equality in America and beyond. And second, I was in awe of him because of his devotion to the elimination of racism, while at the same time commenting in some of his writings the sad permanence, it seems, of racism and other -isms.

Reflecting on those two lessons from Professor Bell, I think we can both pay homage to him, and further the cause by considering his exemplary devotion-- to his students and to the cause of the eradication of isms ---by empowering ourselves to serve within oppressed communities, as an additional advancement for racial progress.

Recently, I attended the LatCrit Biennial academic conference where academics of color wondered aloud where are safe places that allow the thriving-- and even just surviving-- of academics of color to carry on the work of Professor Bell and others who fought tirelessly for us to have the positions we now have in America. Some of us feel under attack in our own schools and in the proliferation of national and state policies that hinder full equality.

Although I, too, am greatly concerned about the future of education and equality in America, I firmly believe we can find safe spaces, which allow us to further follow Professor Bell's legacy, through embracing practical ideals.

We can find space spaces to evolve by serving in spaces where we are needed most *and* are welcomed. When I was a new faculty member trying to get tenure over 20 years ago, I felt unsafe . . . frequently. Works of scholars like Professor Bell assured me that my voice had purpose. Yet, there were few nonwhite faculty members at my institution. I was the only faculty member writing and publishing about race and gender. Many of my law students had never had a black professor and found my presence unfamiliar. In the midst of this all, some faculty announced they would aim to heighten the tenure standards. Needless to say, it was difficult for me to find a safe space within my institution...to even do the work I felt called to do.

Just a few miles from my school in the city was a public elementary school that was almost all black (from decades of white flight and other de facto segregation). I started to volunteer at that school. I would work with the students, many had never engaged with a lawyer. I helped the teachers who had large and busy classrooms. I attended programs and events with the overworked parents, who were struggling to be engaged. And, I cheered for the successes of the students and the school.

In the midst of my volunteer efforts, I learned more about teaching. From these skilled and hardworking black public school teachers, I learned so much about pedagogy. I found a safe space, where I was needed *and* welcomed, where I could be myself and further social justice. And, I got tenure at my law school, while maintaining a sense of well being and purpose. Feeling safe and welcomed with my extended time volunteering, I was able to be even more productive as a teacher and scholar at my institution.

I thought of this as I reflected on Professor Bell and how kind he was toward his students, how engaged he was, and how all of that commitment enhanced, not diminished, him as a scholar. Finding space spaces by visiting and serving in spaces, and with young people, where we are needed most *and* welcomed is a way to survive and thrive in academia, and a way to continue Professor Bell's enduring mission of eradicating the -isms that seem so permanent, especially now in 2017.

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