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Reading bell hooks is always challenging for me. Her writing appears simplistic and almost conversational, yet is deceptively complex. I feel like I create an internal dialogue in response to the ideas that she is sharing. And that may be one of the aspects I like best about her work-she shares her ideas in a way that is personal and demands that in turn. When I read hooks, the experience is re-affirming at times, extremely disquieting and uncomfortable at others; ultimately however, her books always leave me with a sense of responsibility to at least consider ideas that may push my comfort zones around the way I perceive the world and my place in it.

bell hooks is a Distinguished Professor of English at City College in New York. Born Gloria Watkins, she took the pen name "bell hooks" as a way to do the writing that she felt compelled to express without placing her professional advancement within academe in jeopardy. She is the author of many books written over the past 12 years and is often described as a writer, teacher, and insurgent black intellectual. She is termed a radical by some, full of passion and politics who dares to raise the critical questions. She spent her grade school days in segregated schools of the South where she dreamed of being a writer and teacher. Within these black schools, she first experienced learning as political and revolutionary since most education focused on the antiracist struggle. When schools became integrated, her perception of education changed dramatically as evidenced in this passage from *Teaching to Transgress* (1994):

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us... we left a world where teachers believed that educate black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers

whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom (p. 3).

For over a decade, hooks has been addressing critical issues around race, gender, and class in a way that encourages personal reflection and responsibility that leads to social change. I chose two of her most recent books, *Teaching to Transgress* and *Killing Rage* to review. While these two books have varied purposes, they combine to give the reader a way in which to think about cultural issues as well as the resulting social changes needed to address them. *Killing Rage* is written from a black feminist perspective that critiques racism, yet remains defiantly optimistic in the belief that the future can be envisioned without racism. hooks directly confronts tough issues such as internalized racism, feelings of victimization, friendship between black and white women, black identity and self-determinism, revolutionary feminism as a counter to racism, resistance, and a future world without racism. hooks points out the lack of women's voices in the discourse on the politics of race as she gives a critical and rigorous analysis of the problem.

Teaching to Transgress is a book in which strategies for social change around the issues explored in *Killing Rage* are offered. Her ideas center around "engaged pedagogy" where learning becomes action and reflection upon the world to change it. Similar to Freire's (1971) concept of praxis, engaged pedagogy goes beyond making a connection between ideas learned in the classroom and those learned through life experiences by emphasizing self-actualization and well-being, especially of the teacher, if the learner is to be empowered. This type of learning results in education as the practice of freedom that breaks away from the status quo where education merely reinforces domination. Learning through engaged pedagogy moves us toward a revolution of values that shifts our culture away from a "thing"-oriented society toward a "person"-oriented society. With this shift would come an awareness of the detriments of cultural practices that subjugate one person to another, often for the sake of increased material gain. As stated by hooks (1994):

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p. 207).

As I was working on this review, a friend of mine asked me why these books were so great and why I thought they were important to folks in recreation and leisure. Good questions, particularly if you are like me and have to choose carefully for that all too small professional reading time. So, in true Letterman fashion, here are the top 10 reasons why I think these two books should be on your must read list.

1. **hooks tackles sensitive issues around race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in a way that is honest, straight-forward, and fair.** No matter whether you are female or male, a person of color or not, rich or poor,

hooks finds a way for you to see your contributions to the problems as well as to the solutions. Since everyone is treated equally, I think you are willing to acknowledge your role and consider some of her thoughts on potential changes.

2. Her cultural critique is framed within a black feminist perspective that is not isolationist, Afrocentric, male-bashing, or victimized. One of the criticisms frequently leveled against feminists is that we are perceived as belligerent in our accusations and perpetuate a feeling of helplessness that focuses on women as victims subject to the whims of a sexist world. While I do not necessarily agree with that stereotypic view of feminist scholarship, I do think that hooks confronts men and women in a way that makes visible the roles each plays in the continuance of patriarchy and male privilege. In much the same way, she forces acknowledgment of racism without abdicating responsibility for personal action by *all* of us. She calls upon those of us in the dominant culture to learn to be allies while demanding that people of color recognize their own internalized racism, to recognize the “rage and move it beyond fruitless scapegoating of any group, linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and makes redemptive struggle possible” (hooks, 1995, p. 20).

3. She offers ways to encourage empowerment through engaged pedagogy and critical thinking. The intellectual work done around social change will never be politically neutral; rather, the work will focus on transformative visions and insights that in turn will lead to more freedom and empowerment. For some of us, the teaching environment is less than conducive to engaged pedagogy. We are confronted daily with the frustrating message that teaching is a duller, less valuable aspect of the academic profession than scholarship and research dollars. Many of our students are less than enthusiastic when we ask them to actually learn something new, to critically think about their biases, to move against and beyond their known boundaries. To educate in this manner calls for a willingness to practice freedom, to challenge each other intellectually, and nurture a new type of learner who will be able to critically analyze, devise, and take action on social change strategies.

4. She encourages a revolution in values that questions the materialism on which our culture continues to place worth and value. As suggested in *Teaching to Transgress*, the current appeal to return to traditional values is a thinly disguised message that promotes a return to domination based on racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism and promotes a vision of freedom equated with materialism (p. 28). For example, the cry to return to traditional family values is little more than a notion of family where sexist traditions are upheld as the stabilizing traditions with little recognition that the idealized patriarchal family is not always the “safe” space so desperately sought. She builds on an idea suggested by Martin Luther King that a true revolution of values will not be possible until material possessions, profit motives, and property rights take a secondary position to issues such as racism, sexism, and classism.

5. **She embraces change in which everyone has some responsibility for building a sense of community that reflects openness, respect, and authenticity.** Her concept of "beloved community" is one that is familiar to some of us in recreation and leisure. Her sense of beloved community is one where "loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences" (hooks, 1995, p. 264). Rather than build community based on an insistence that we erase and forget differences, she advocates for justice and caring built on an affirmation by each one of us as to who we are and how we live our lives as shaped by our identity and cultural legacy. I agree that this sense of beloved community is a realistic possibility, albeit challenging, because in pockets around my community, I can see places where individuals have worked to reach this goal. I can see it at the local community center that struggles to include lesbian and gay families within their program structure, in neighborhood gatherings where friends of all races socialize together, and at school where people continually challenge the "curriculum keepers" to be inclusive and respectful of the many differences that exist in our community. These folk have developed a critical consciousness that has enabled them to let go of assumptions and values centered on privileges associated with white supremacy, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. From these beloved communities come the foundations for affirmations that give us the courage to challenge one another, to work through misunderstandings, and provide a shared vision based on solidarity and trust. For some of us, that means starting to build this community within research centers, classrooms, community centers, and on playgrounds. For all of us, it means building beloved community in our own homes, at work, as well as in our neighborhood.

6. **She advocates absolutely for anyone engaged in teaching (in or out of the academy) to approach that opportunity with passion, a sense of activism, and creativity that results in mutual engagement.** This sense of excitement about and pleasure from learning has become a hallmark of hooks' view about pedagogy. She recognizes that some people equate excitement as potentially disruptive of the serious atmosphere assumed to be essential to the learning process. To teach and learn within this environment is to transgress. We begin to see our students, our participants, as individuals—we begin to see ourselves as co-learners. Teaching and learning become a collective effort where responsibility exists on both sides of the desk. In this environment our most progressive critical thinkers and social critics will feel compelled to enter and encourage creative interaction with the learners.

7. **hooks is optimistic in her idealism, yet grounded in the reality of the magnitude of the social change needed to address these emotional cultural issues.** When I read the work of bell hooks, I never leave her book feeling like I am clueless as to what needs to change nor am I unaware of the practicalities and difficulties of these changes. hooks tends to be critical of social conditions, astute in her analysis, and committed to going beyond the critique and into the transformation. I find her work a good example of how to connect theory and practice. For example, her critique of racism is well grounded in theories around race politics; yet her social change strategies

are sensitive to the rage felt by people who confront racism on a daily basis. She uses that rage as a catalyst for productive change.

8. She writes in a non-academic style that allows many types of readers to access her ideas. I like that hooks has made a conscious choice in what she writes, how she writes, and for whom she writes. In *Killing Rage*, she talks about this decision:

Black intellectuals who are committed to ending domination, exploitation, and oppression in all its myriad manifestations, racism, sexism, class elitism, etc., will be politically challenged to interrogate the way we work, what we do, how we speak and write, to see whether or not we are working in a manner that crosses boundaries. I have made specific decisions about the nature of my work in the interest of making it accessible to a broader audience. Those decisions involve doing writing that may not impress my academic peers... To take that risk seems minor given the possible good that can come when the effort is made to share knowledge informed by progressive politics in diverse ways (p. 235).

9. She details social changes needed that go to the core of the problem centered on patriarchal biases and white supremacy values that allow for devaluation and subjugation of human beings because they are female or black. For example, in *Killing Rage* hooks talks about the importance of women gaining strength to confront sexist, racist constraints by sharing knowledge and resources rather than bonding on the basis of being victims. Repudiating sexism and racism without a victim identity allows women to maintain a sense of empowerment and control in finding social change strategies to dismantle such arbitrary social constructions.

10. Like many of us, she is searching for the ways in which individuals can experience freedom in their lives that will result in more opportunities for self-actualization and empowerment. This freedom will result when the constraints of socially imposed perceptions based on arbitrary standards around race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are removed. I think that many of the concerns that hooks has for sense of freedom, self-actualization, and empowerment are issues that recreation and leisure service professionals deal with on a daily basis. We search for leisure experiences that add to our sense of identity, that contribute to our sense of autonomy and self-determinism, and that enable us to feel empowered in our lives. We occasionally use leisure as a site of resistance to culturally imposed roles and stereotypes. We transgress boundaries in our leisure that in turn, help us to consider social change in other areas of our lives where arbitrary constraints exist.

I am not sure if any book review will convince a person to go read a particular book or author. After all, my review is biased by my own personal set of values and realities. The only way that you can judge the worth of this review is to go read the books, make your own evaluations, draw your own conclusions. Of one thing I am fairly certain-you can't read hooks without having her words press some button, somewhere. Although you may not

agree with her outlook, she will succeed in getting you to examine your views. After all, isn't that the point?

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