

catalyst

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Little
Big
Stories
Everywhere



*With each dawn, dialogue, and downturn
,— downpours, too
ergonomics and economies dictate energy.*

*Economic impacts expand far
beyond employment and stories drop
— downstairs in the kitchen, too.*

Jennifer Schneider

Hope blooms eternal, the saying goes. Spring, too. Perennials – candy cane sorrels and blue grape hyacinths. Annuals – geraniums, impatiens. Patiently impatient. Waiting for the next time. Awaiting time. Even when time stops, time ticks. Spring has always been a blur of fair weather. School fairs, as well.

A bevy of activity in all disciplines: Business. Computer. Science. Quiz bowls. Bowls of botany greens. Even in 2020. 2021, too. Somehow, the organizers found a way.

So much change. Change so little. School is virtual. Science fair, too.

With all work done at home – across the kitchen table – learning becomes more visible. Our home no exception.

The student, my child, eager to experiment. Eager to experience and execute the scientific method, too. Accepting of all expectations. Except everything seems harder than ever before. The fair organizers communicated often.

Online forms. Video presentations. Approaching due dates. Deadlines, too. Days on end. Calendars on the mend. Quick now. Can't fall behind. Seek approvals. Seek data. Seek science.

The electronic messages were cryptic.

Record.

Upload.

Rubrics.

Review.

The papers, in contrast, scattered across the dark oak, were clear. Some would be scientists mattered. Some did not. As I cleared the clutter, my eyes caught words – small bits of phrases. Small moments, memories too, of Spring. Stories of Spring bloom.

Presentation guidelines.

“7-minute maximum. Do not exceed.”

Time ticks. Eyes scroll. Eyes beside me. Watch. Eyes settle. New section. Analytical ability.

“Is he evaluating the significance of his own data properly?”

“Is he aware of sources of error?”

Eyes continue to scroll. Presentation Scoring.

“Is the student's competency with the principles such that he can answer questions with clarity, and elaborate where necessary to make a point?”

Competency assessed. Gender assumed. On the Mathematics, Computer Science, and Engineering rubrics, too.

He

He

He

It's not the first time I noticed the text. The chosen words. It's a perennial. Hydrangea, Hibiscus. *He*. Returns yearly. No need for planting.

The fair has used the same rubric for the past ten years, at least. Each year, I scoff and squabble with the air between it and I. Sometimes the others listen.

Most often they leave the room. Don't cause trouble, the elder *He* in the room says.

Not worth it.

In the past, I've listened. So many distractions. But if this isn't worth it, what is?

I've been wanting to write about this dusty, dated, discriminatory rubric for a while now. Never knew how. I lacked an angle, as they say.

Angles always just out of reach.

In some respects, I still wonder how the language has persisted. In others, I'm surprised I wonder at all. I don't know why I'm surprised, nonetheless. I've grown used to the oversights. Yet less used to my compliance.

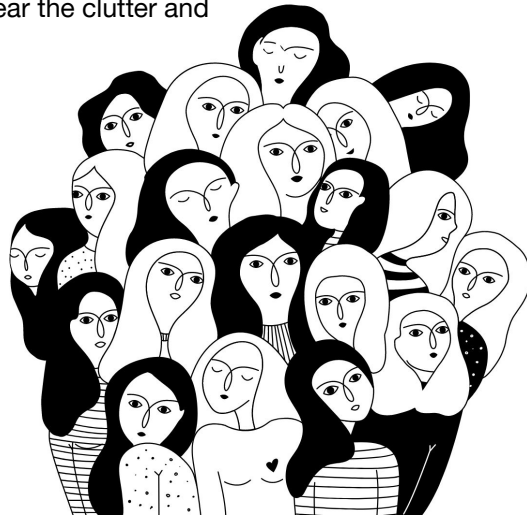
My instincts inflamed. I turned to continue to clear the clutter and tried to collect my thoughts.

At best an oversight. Most certainly a message.

Electronic messages everywhere. Lately, it's been a bit of a challenge. I challenge. Eyes rolls.

My son collected my thoughts for me.

"Hey, why does it say he?" he asked.
"Everyone can do science".



It's no wonder the computer club at our local high school is 100% male. It's also no wonder science fair participation is predominantly male. In fact, it's no wonder at all that science "has a diversity problem" (Nature, 2019).

When the language is exclusionary, so is the reality.

Words weave wonder. Wonders awakes awe. Words wreak havoc, too.

It's also no wonder women still incur feelings of not belonging on a daily basis.

"Is he evaluating the significance of his own data properly?"

"Is he aware of sources of error?"

This is text pulled from a rubric published in 2021. Posted on a state website. And yet we wonder why gender discrimination and diversity in the sciences continues to be so problematic.

For young scientists whom identify in any way other than "he" the rubric – one encouraged to be used as a checklist before submitting to a local science fair – tells them they don't belong even before they get started.

I know the feeling. I've been called an odd duck most of my life.

A quack even.

Growing up, I always thought it was me. We all did. I grew up as a learner who colored, poorly, in the lines while never wanting to. I was taught to comply, center all comments – no left or right justifications allowed, and never confuse my place with theirs.

Ideas mattered, of course, as long as the ideas were theirs.



Not mine. Not of the mind. I grew up as a learner who defied normal conventions while never being permitted space for defiance. Categorized as not normal, I became nobody.

Norms nurture naming conventions with little niceties for those who know how to color in the lines.

Electives were reserved for period 7. Two times a week. In home economics we made pillows. All thirty of us girls. Across the hall, the boys learned to code. In Binary. I want to be there. But thinking was binary, too.

I remember what it was like to push through walls of bodies clothes in tie dye cotton, frayed denim, and patched leather puffers to make my way towards a classroom in which I was not welcome.

I recall, too, what it was like to approach my high school chemistry teacher for advice – I had an interest in medicine, computers, too – *there's no future, don't do it*, he cautioned.

And I listened. Head nodding, pencil tapping, feet shuffling.
I even said Thank you.

Later, at university - I tried again. I remember what it was like to make my way towards a third-floor window office in which I was not welcome. I asked for advice on writing.

There's no audience, don't do it, he cautioned.
And I listened. Again.
Thank him, too.

And later, tried again. His office, up the two flights of stairs beyond the glass door hidden, a bit off West 8th.

A faded “Writing Center” affixed in sticky decals and scraped paint. Simpson stickers decorate the metal filing cabinet in the far-right corner.

He sat in the tattered leather chair behind the wooden desk.

Cramped, always. His long legs tied in knots beneath faded black denim and near sheer knees as raw knuckles gripped instruments – electric red preferred - and your fury – also electric.

Though his name escapes me, I know he watches.

Always. Even as I write, I hear his voice in my head. Reminding Me.

Of my inferior prose. My poor syntax. My weak command of my pen - a black ink engraved fountain that was a gift from my then boyfriend, who knew I dreamed of becoming a writer and who later dumped me when he grew tired of my tears.

My inappropriate use of our language. *His, not Mine.*
My unusual name. *Mine, not His.* Good thing I type, now.

I still see the giant red D on my first essay. the one I spent weeks on – Drafting, Crafting – and then Sharing my Story. My everything. Mama and Papa. The House. The Secrets. The Pregnancy. The Lost Pregnancy. The Lies. My way Out. Mine. Not Theirs. I told him everything.

And then he decided everything I told you was *Less Than.* That I was *Less Than.*

Me. Not Him.



Part of me hopes he is no longer teaching.

Part of me hopes he is. We need him, of course.

Never enough teachers. Especially males.

Last I read 80% were female and fair skinned.

If only I had thicker skin. Perhaps he would not haunt me so. *Me. Not Him.*

Turns out I'm not alone.

Most women have been recipients of similar messages.

A recent tweet – stamped March 6, 2021 - Monash Education

@MonashEducation

Mar 6

I've had to overcome my self-doubts and #impostersyndrome.

I've felt like an outsider and a fraud @JaneWillkin1994 writes candidly about the challenges of #womeninacademia,

part of our #IWD2021 series featuring our top academics.

Full story #MonashLens <https://bit.ly/2NQ71q0>

And a recent article published by Monash Lens (2021) that explores the realities of being a woman at the top of academic.

Turns out the view from the top can be / is / just as disconcerting as that from the bottom.

Exclusion comes in many shapes and sizes.

Now, I know I'm not alone.

We all feel like Quacks at one point or another.

Pushed to offices without windows and windows without welcome signs.

Yet, somehow, we continue to quack.

The persistent challenge of low diversity representation in the sciences has been decades in the making.

At global, national, regional, state, and local levels, women and women of color in STEM fields are both underrepresented and often marginalized.

Despite trends suggesting that technology and engineering related skills are among those most in demand in the workplace, deep gender gaps persist (Lund et. al, 2019).

Computer science, engineering, and technology fields consistently demonstrate the most significant gender imbalances both in higher education and the workplace (STEM Women, 2019).

This imbalance and associated gaps originate early in educational journeys and commonly present and extend throughout all career levels (Carlana, 2019).

Antiquated rubrics and ruminations, measurements and metrics of mastery, along with equally antiquated antics, persist.

Even for the subset of women who transcend educational barriers and undertake careers in STEM fields, research suggests that these women tend to leave the workplace at much higher rates and at much sooner dates than their male counterparts (Else, 2019; Frank, 2019).





More recently, COVID-19 has further compounded this problem, with women abandoning the workforce “at four times the rate as men” (Schneider, Hsu, & Horsley, 2020, para. 1). Similar statistics present around the globe (Catalyst, 2020).

Women have been disproportionately impacted by COVID in the workplace.

Women of color even more so.

"I can't keep this up," one woman tells NPR (See <https://t.co/LUIJUcZozm>)

None of us should have to.

When I first commented on the rubric to another parent, he said: “Now, with COVID and all, it doesn't seem the right time. Are you really going to add more to their plate? Don't cause trouble.”

But trouble comes in many forms. I think of John Lewis and good trouble.

There's always a reason not to. Not to say something. Not to raise the issue. Not to raise awareness. Now, I know, there's also always more reason to.

What's the big deal, he added?

And then I thought of other times I've been asked the same.

Last week, I asked for two pounds of chicken breasts and he brought home three pounds of thighs.

I blame it on the media. Magazines, too. Long legs covered in sheer nylon beckon on front and back covers.



The thighs were on sale, 99 cents a pound, he stated bluntly. and tossed the plastic bag of groceries on the counter.

What's the big deal?, he asked.

I should have spoken, but grabbed the chicken, peeled back the cellophane, and positioned the Kitchen Aid instead.

The big deal is everything and anything.

It's the details of the day to day, including the rubric document, its choice of words, and its rules.

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng writes of a progressive suburb – Shaker Heights – where everything is planned.

The rules are set: the layout of the town's roads, permitted colors of the houses that line them, and expectations for those that reside within.

In worlds of middle and high-school science fair, workplaces of all kinds, and scientific laboratories of all natures – the reality is no different.

The rule are set.

Everything is planned.

If we are to change the narrative, we must work to impact plot and character wherever a story permits – wherever we identify and seize an opportunity.

To change the story, we must also write the story.

I think of little stories everywhere.

Women firefighters (in a small Maryland district a powerful cohort of black female firefighters pave new trails on a daily basis (Reneau, 2020)) and athletes (Megan Rapino breaking down boundaries and generating dialogue celebrating women in sports (Harmata, 2019); Katie Sowers changing the way the world watches football through verbal and non-verbal dialogue (Billings, 2020)).

Thanks to popular media - we know their faces.

We are more aware of their stories.

Each doing remarkable things.

Each doing something.

There's never a right time.

Only always the time.

A recent interaction with colleague proved both a timely and disheartening reminder in online work and learning contexts.

My work responsibilities include the review of pre-term course set-ups for our online programs.

I usually work in the social sciences, but in a recent term I worked with a new team of STEM faculty.

As I was reviewing courses, I noticed an instructor did not upload an image to our university learning management system (per policy, for viewing by students in courses and extra-curricular groups).

I emailed the instructor and shared a job aid on how to add images in our classrooms.

The instructor replied and explained that while she used to include a personal image, she no longer does so because she found that students were distracted by her appearance.



She explained that her name does not reveal that she is a person of color and, in her experiences, whenever she did not include a photo student focus would be directed more toward her subject matter knowledge and teaching ability.

Harris (2019) writes that “[i]n more than a dozen academic fields—largely STEM related—not a single black student earned a doctoral degree in 2017” (para. 1).

In a field where we so desperately need strong female and persons of color role models, this instructor felt she had to conceal her appearance and her identity in order for students to treat her with respect and focus on their coursework.

If our STEM instructors of color remain hesitant to share their racial identity with students how will the challenge of under-representation in STEM fields ever change?

Many look to online programs as opportunities to expand access to females and students of color in STEM fields (Drew, Galindo-Gonzalez, Ardissonne, & Triplett, 2016).

How will we ever see changes in numbers if our mentors, role models, and current (however small) sample of female and instructors of color leaders in these areas are not comfortable sharing this central part of themselves?

Moreover, what happens when we take steps to conceal our gender and racial identities with the purported goal of emphasizing our subject matter knowledge and teaching ability?

While I recognize that the choice is not mine to be made, I cannot help but think that removing an image helps only to perpetuate existing biases in ways not unlike the use of “he” in a science fair rubric.

Even my use of “timely” a few sentences earlier is questionable.

In reality, there is no timely response, only a necessary one.

The Baader-Meinhoff phenomenon talks of how we become more aware of “coincidences” after learning of a concept.



Specifically, the phenomenon describes the experience “where something you recently learned suddenly appears ‘everywhere’” (P.K., 2019, para. 1).

Somehow, we focus more closely and our brains are wired to perceive the new, frequent observations as coincidences.

This is also known as the “frequency illusion” (P.K., 2019).

Perhaps the above-described exchange could be described a timely interaction.

Perhaps my brush with the language of the rubric was, as well.

More likely, though, I need to be more observant and more mindful of the interactions and experiences around me.

The little stories with big messages – and opportunities for change.

We’ve listened long enough. It’s always the right time to say something, when one can do so safely.

Clewell and Ginorio (2002) note that:

although deep structural issues shape the experience of diverse populations in our society, we begin our review at the individual level, so as to understand and sort what we know about individuals before tackling the complexities of the sociocultural level (p. 611).

The relationship “between individual and society” is “very close” (Hossain & Ali, 2014) and the question of to what degree is one (the individual) influenced by the other (associated sociocultural and structural issues) closely considered (Hossain & Ali, 2014).

These questions, like tradition, are persistent.

Fuhrman & Bailey (1993), noting that “[t]he concern for the link between the individual and society is an ancient one”, explore limitations associated with traditional approaches to an examination of individual-society relationships in that they “do not contain a rich enough sense of the relationship between the individual, society, and nature” (p. 2).

And so, I decided to do something.

Despite the bad timing, the questionable bigness of the problem, and those that told me not to.

Every individual can and should for activism is something that takes “many forms, and occurs in actions both large and small” (Rose, 2017, p. 68).

Saying nothing in the face of blatant exclusionary text only exacerbates the silent and pernicious work of the system we work within.

Marian Wright Edelman (Founder of Children’s Defense Fund) writes that “Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation. You just need to be a flea against injustice” (Goodreads, 2021).



I might not be able to bite, but I can buzz.

And so I – we - sent an email, from my account.

The text read as follows:

Dear _____,

Please review the text of the posted rubric. My son and I would like to better understand use of the pronoun “he” in Sections [].

My son signed his name, too. Right below mine.

I’m sure they’re busy. In-boxes always stuffed. Real problems, real people, real trouble. We are still waiting to hear back.

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**Alpha Indidigenous
Female Perspective on
Language as Continuous
Assault and Genocide**



Shannon Avery

When I ask, I learn something new. Sometimes, some things I never wanted to know.

My first experience with the Judgement and devaluation of my humanity from complete strangers came when I was on my first ride on the bus, to a school I had never attended. I could feel all eyes on me.

The next few days, as “friendly” folk came to know I had owned and liked Barbie dolls, I received a gift, a sweatshirt for my Barbie that said, “Wild Indian”, in a fabric of unnatural material which didn’t fit properly, and was hand sewn.

It was so strange, and unkind. I could feel that, even though my 6 year old self could not understand that hatred behind it. And for some reason, this silly little girl receiving a gift from a new “friend” just didn’t know how to react. And sadly, this little girl inside this half dead grown ass woman still doesn’t understand the effort put forth to make me feel “off”, “uncomfortable”, and “wrong”.

Apparently, I was the only one confused and astounded as the rest of the kids on the bus began a strange chant of “woo woo woo”, patting their mouths with their hands, as if mocking the Native singer. I have never seen any Native do this in their home, in public, or in spiritual dancing. It has only been a white person to use this gesture and noise to define me and the few other dark skinned children at school and on the bus.

I am more interested in why they choose these movements and sounds to mock and ridicule, and the roots of their ignorance about other cultures, and the type of family life they lived, than I am offended.

However, it was perhaps the beginning of what the others have defined as my “chip on the shoulder” attitude indicating that I was somehow difficult to work with, unwilling to conform, and so angry that I might explode.

I am more likely to implode as a result of racist actions taken against me and family through our recent decades on this land attempting to live peacefully and co-exist as someone who is “less than” my peer counterparts.

I cannot fathom the motivation and brainwashing to make a child make another child hurt. And so, while thousands of tiny “digs’ at my identity through words, deeds, gifts, opportunities, and hopeless unattainable efforts to resolve and equalize that feeling and have similar achievements, meet their milestones, and I have threatened to make me end me.

Yet, I still have not done so. In fact, to this day, I am embarking upon something much more.

Repulsion of my inner self to not use language of the colonizer, at least not in the way I was schooled. And that began as I made my first of the many new laws of the land of my sovereign home, Cozy Cove Nation.

Today, I am both the Queen and the King of this emerging bubble of “I no longer will allow my mind and mouth to speak absurdities”, (except when I’m joking and I twist an astronomical amount of raptures on the use of language just to make me and people around me laugh).



I joke way more than I want, yet the seriousness of what needs to be said is so painful to bring words to embrace the concept of uncomfortable feelings from being around those others that have led to decisions in this document.

My love of language shall be an exercise to embrace an opposing idea, and as much I love rules, I will make adjustments in functional word use personally, and will share this challenge and reasons that might allow you to experiment with me.

The first rule I instituted was based upon the fact that in the English Language, there exists many consonants and vowels which are silently ignored.

Then, to complicate and escalate the difficulty and necessity of a proper education, there are consonants and vowels that are “Hard” and “Soft” and “silent when followed by the letter “?”, etc.

Why do we do that to a letter? Why the randomness of some letters having a voice, and others silenced. Why do I understand the foundational concepts of nonsensical rules to achieve the master’s control and superiority over the ignorant? Why are you going to read this article with curiosity, all the while judging me for speaking about it?

We all know, if we have received proper Language Arts instruction and have read numerous books to know that language in its duplicity also reflects its repulsivity and beauty.



And so, my only request of you, as a reader, is to be engaged and enraged enough to finish my humble article and then question yourself and your own use of words. As my knowledge of this subject is limited by my bias both as a descendent of both Indigenous People and the progeny of the Colonizers.

Please, for the love of God, do not marry two or more words together in what is called a “contraction”, where several letters are demolished, told to be forgotten, and never mentioned, held as trace thoughts we share about the two words, and merely held together with a symbol called an apostrophe.

That is considered word rape and child marriage where non consenting words are bonded together to create an absurd new word for which they did not approve to create.

Queen of Cozy Cove Nation Declares Every Consonant and Vowel be pronounced when speaking English.

Queen of Cozy Cove Nation Declares No Person Shall Ever Utilize the Laziness And Banishing of a Letter or Unlawful Marriage of Any Words by the Use of a “Contraction”

Queen of Cozy Cove Nation Declares Anishinaabe The Official Language of the Land.

Queen of Cozy Cove Nation Declares the Metric System for all units of measurement as it is the most dominantly used, easily calculated, and unified scientifically for all.

Queen of Cozy Cove Nation Requests ALL Citizens and Guests Adjust or Face Consequences.

The reasons for doing so are due to the fact that language was one of the first weapons, and most vital tool of a victor of trade.

Language was not only used to define and degrade, it was used as a weapon of poison KoolAid to allow the pathological takers to be given full authority to adjudicate inhumane treatment to others who were considered primitive, stupid, lazy, and leveled and bedeviled by the effects of intoxicants.

That was done solely to allow the victors of trade to take so much more than what was agreed upon.

My indigenous ancestors were forced to internalize a new identity of marginalization by the use of stereotypes, media spread, scientifically supported inaccurate, unjust, and blatant lies about who they were.

Their children were taken forcefully, placed in boarding schools and assimilated to speak this language we call English.

These children were punished in any way for not speaking English, and not behaving in the manner for which they had to behave in order to survive in this new world of coexistence.

Painfully, my great great Grandfather, Chief Flatmouth made a treaty with the government which quickly devoured anything wholesome and natural, to trade the lands from the west of the Mississippi to the Red River, with the understanding that other Indigenous, displaced people from an eastern part of what was emerging as the United States of America would be allowed to live there in peace.

Instead, that transaction resulted in a population of immigrants who call themselves Western Minnesotans, were given land and freedom to multiply their numbers, allowed them to mentally and physically put people they were not comfortable looking at on Reservations and labels that have lasted for eternity.

We, the removed, must purchase the privilege to exist on valuable land so blessed with the resource of indescribably rich soil considered to be the best farmland in the world, beautiful lakes full of fish, fun, and tranquility, and abundance of trees (to the conquerors, timber), and it now shared with a fake niceness, that is not true kindness.

People here co-exist, yet do not view each other as equals for opposing reasons and cultural values.

Not a single member of my great great Grandfather's tribe or family received any piece of this land in legal documentation.

It was freely given to settlers, which we call illegal immigrants now, to the tune of 40 to 160 acres (metric here) per person at a scoffable price of \$1.25 an acre which could be "owed" to the government, just for taking the "risk" of acquiring it.

Homesteaders did not have to pay for this land up front.

There were so many groups of people whose "expertise" in land title I consider mercenaries of human destruction, gravitated here, flourished, and were rewarded perpetually for their bold actions of title and documentation of ownership that had not existed on this continent ever before.

My ancestors of Indigenous nature respected the treaties and did not harm anyone new coming onto the land because it was not their nature and if they acted in any threatening or questioning manner, they knew they were outnumbered and out armed.



The saying, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” was the norm perpetuated to all new arrivals to dehumanize and destruct a whole population who naively allowed traders and invaders peace, until they would not do so anymore.

There were numerous battles of which were only discussed and never written about as the land transfer placed my ancestors as victims of child trafficking by the use of “assimilating” and “ensuring” that we would survive and be better off for knowing the ways of the new rulers.

My ancestors faced starvation as they could not manage to live off hunting and gathering with only a tiny portion of the land they once enjoyed freely.

My ancestors understood the need to speak the same, communicate effectively, and learn the ways of Chimookiman.

They had grown weary from death and disease brought upon by the new people and resistance was futile.

They wanted to believe in the land of the free, enjoy the freedom to pursue happiness, and believe all the declarations of the leaders of this new country.

They wanted equality, peace, and a chance to be happy.

They gave love, laughter, and food freely.

They came to the new people in peace.

They only expected the same in return.



Sadly, that never happened. So the new “homesteaders” “brokers” and “recorders of deeds” legally ensured that a Native person would not be allowed to use, own, trespass, or in any other way set foot on newly changed ownership of land.

These people infested our lands to do deceitful transfers of our natural resources.

They were rewarded not just high regard, but in fortunes I don’t think we today can truly understand.

Their actions of words and documents to remove and confine my ancestors was so difficult to contrive from the Native perspective of living thousands of years without harsh man-made restrictions.

Starvation, disease, hopelessness, and alcohol replaced their freedom.

These new land deeds were not only enforced locally, but by the military, as it was viewed as an act of war for a Native person to question, disobey, or otherwise break this treaty made in peace.

Travel across these newly owned lands required approved English documentation officially stamped or signed by the White Leader in Charge of Local Indian Affairs, allowing such a person to be near the settlers, perhaps to just travel to another reservation and visit relatives or go the trading place to procure enough food and material for permanent shelters (another new concept of colonialism), and the document recorded the name, both the Indian and White Assigned Name, others in the party, the length allowed to leave, and destinations allowed to visit.

While the neighboring settlers enjoyed the freedom to travel anywhere freely without preapproval and the luxury of stagecoaches, and along with insurmountable restrictions they had to travel by foot.



A trail of tears was perhaps what they left every time they had to leave their reservation.

Records of how these transactions occurred were clearly documented as used as proof of ownership and indisputable, unquestionable because of the “transparency” of legality.

Yet, records of the Treaties, so difficult to discover, were often illegible, destroyed in parts, and kept from the public, the signed parties, and anyone questioning the process or equality of distribution.

Documents in written form created a false new world of a power shift that has been unstoppable, utilized in conquering other indigenous people across the world in similar textbook fashion, and passively acceptable by the common citizens of the Colonizing forces.

It is sorely, due to this reason, that language weapons have to be dismantled at some point, somewhere, and rightfully so, long overdue, now, in this land where life destroying interpretations continue to harm all parties who did not receive proper payment for such transactions, we continue to die at young ages, of preventable diseases, trapped in generational poverty and trauma.

In this writer’s experience, treaty rights to education and healthcare continue to be utilized as weapons of genocide.

The use of widely acceptable labels such as drunk, addict, mentally ill, lazy, welfare baby makers, homeless, criminals, worthless, ruthless, violent, and stupid unless fully integrated and assimilated who have managed to survive without a mark on their permanent record.

Therefore, without much ado, changes must be immediately addressed to assuage the wounds of the legacy and products of deceit, bribery, trickery, threatened and public displays of brutal force upon the products of genetic material that remember the hearts, minds, and souls, of former trustees, stewards of such land in Western Minnesota.

Thus, the declarations made forth today are merely primitive, lazy, and formulated with the thoughts of equality and challenging concepts of leveling a playing field for a new form of humanity contrived by a mind inebriated with thoughts of reparations, something ¼ of my ancestors were never given privilege to enjoy.

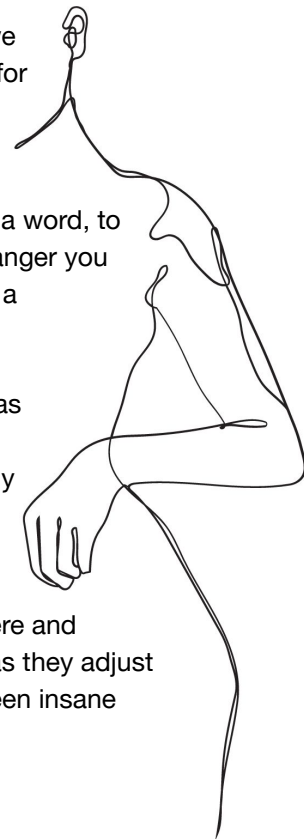
These declarations may spark a desire for Truth and Reconciliation.

Simply, this is the process of rejection of rules used to control, bravery to speak out against acceptable norms of rules of words we have all learned since infancy, and stupidity to demand to change for things that are just simply absurd, manipulative, pretentious, and deplorable, into something interesting, evolving, and equalizing.

Can you try just for a day, to make your brain speak every letter of a word, to not use a contraction, to measure in metric, or will it frustrate and anger you because of the difficulty and then you are likely to argue to me it is a ridiculous request.

Likely your brain will either enjoy the challenge, or reject it fiercely as your mind tries to change just a few simple rules that in other languages and parts of the world, it is inherent. It is an exercise only to gauge how far away we truly are in our ability of the brain to go against simple rules and it will not come easy.

Here in my sovereign land I make it law so that we begin somewhere and practice consistency. I may not have a visitor more than one time as they adjust to this cognitive dissonance, and they may simply declare this Queen insane because they can not follow the rules of my game.



We must evolve, or we shall dissolve and we still cannot breathe; we cannot live and continue to deceive that person inside who needs to believe that there exists the possibility to weave a future that is so much better than we alone could ever conceive.

We are all now mixed breeds, isolated institutionally and pandemically, deceived, separated by a class system so we blame the victim who could not achieve the American Dream while the billionaires continue to thrive, we are taught to hate each other and poisoned minds are not allowed to perceive that another possibility exists, a new world in which we must together grieve as we shed old thoughts, historic memories differently perceived that once served purpose feeding our greed and selfish need to put people in their place when they act outside our expectations.

Original stewards of this land demand payment through a shift and enlightenment of humanity.

We need fresh minds, renewed hearts, compassion, empathy, barely existing within the people who now live here.

We originated here, have suffered enough, we will all jump into a canyon together and end this ourselves before we allow you to continue this genocide, yet, we will not leave.

It's time to learn the truth about what colonialism has achieved. It's time to level the playing field for the underdogs of conquest because we shall learn to dismantle all forms of destruction upon our souls, culture, minds, bodies, and ability to achieve.

We want to be free in thought, word, and deed.

Kings Never Die; Queens Never Cry. Mississippi Goddamn. We Shall Never Allow That Shit Again. Mankato, conceived by the Devi--hang another human, and this Queen will implode her stiletto upon the ones attempting to place others below by creating a ghetto.

We will go forward with hope, love, forgiveness, yet unwillingness to continue the legacy of suppression of nature and remove the power of targeted confinement and live limitless as ethically with the audacity to be true to our own personal human and spiritual nature.

Are you willing to identify in a small insignificant way with a self proclaimed Alpha Female Indigenous mother's mind, soul, and dreams?

I challenge your words and your eyes that you want a safe world free from the bondage of racism, selfishness and greed. I want to know what equality means to you, as you now might have a glimpse of what it means to me.



An aerial photograph of a residential neighborhood. A central road is heavily damaged with a large, irregular pothole in the middle. The pothole is filled with a grey material and has several cracks. The surrounding area consists of houses with various roof colors (brown, grey, purple), green lawns, and concrete driveways. A white semi-truck is visible on the right side of the road, and a blue car is parked on the left. The text "This Road is Occupied" is overlaid on the pothole in a black serif font.

This Road is Occupied

Sukhvir Kaur

Stratfort Wood Valley was not an average neighborhood in shabby little Kalamazoo, Michigan. A large opulent sign greeted visitors at its entrance.

Tulips and grape hyacinths bloomed below the sign, planted there by brown hands. To the left sat a pristine pond, which announced passage into white-collar terrain. The houses in the Valley exuded a distinct awareness of superiority.

Every house had a large, landscaped yard and a white picket fence. All, except one. 29233 Stratfort Wood Valley sat at the right corner of a cul-de-sac, brooding and sighing due to the invasion it endured by a new, brown family.

“I’m going to lab,” Manny yelled from the mudroom as she crammed her feet into tennis shoes. Midterms were coming up, and she had a few precious days left before exams.

“Okay! Don’t forget your lunch!” her mom yelled back in a thick accent.

This is how it always was. Her family was loud. Even a normal conversation was a choir of yelling, laughing, talking over one another.

That was why they felt so out of place here, like the very house was rejecting them as a body rejects an alien kidney. Manny smacked the button to the garage, which groaned and moaned upon ascent. Then, her face fell.

“They took over the road again,” she said through the half-closed door.

Manny heard her mother’s feet padding across the wood floor. The door flung open.

Her mother, Mrs. Kaur, wore a green printed dupatta to cover her head, paired with yoga pants that hugged her hips. The woman had a style Manny liked to call “unapologetic.”

“Are you serious?” Mrs. Kaur asked, glancing over Manny’s head towards the road. Her face also fell.

“Yup. Now what?” Manny asked, picking at her lips. “I’m going to be late for lab again.”

“You start car. I’ll go talk to them.” Mrs. Kaur shut the door behind her and strode toward the road.

Manny could swear she heard the house sigh as he rid of the invading parasites. Mrs. Kaur continued to who had chosen, once again, to have a barbecue in the middle of the public road with their kids and toys strewn about.

Someone had also taken the time to erect a large tent with a huge “M” across the top. Football season in Michigan was no joke for white folk. Manny started the ignition and watched her mother in the rearview mirror.

A chunky, pale woman with one of those “I’m the manager here” haircuts smiled at Mrs. Kaur. Manny knew those smiles well. She dealt with people like that all day. The kind that gave sweet smiles but ignored her brown skin and the proper pronunciation of her name.



Mrs. Kaur bobbed her head in acknowledgment, the way typical Desi mothers always do. Manny watched as her mom pointed at Manny and then at the road as if to say, “Hey...what gives?” A pasty white man with a large gut, beer in hand, came into view as he walked toward her mom.

“Great,” Manny muttered under her breath. “Guess I’ll be missing lab today.”

She pulled the keys from the ignition and climbed out of the grey Nissan. Manny walked down the steep driveway, leaves crunching beneath her feet. The trees were a wild orange and red, imitating the embers of a fire. These were the parts of Michigan she loved. Her eyes found the large man holding a beer bottle. He looked up at her and flared his nostrils.

“Hi there,” Manny plastered on her nicest for-all-you-white-folk smile. The kind of smile that might be trying too hard in hopes of coming off as a convincing American.

“I just need to get to lab, so I was wondering if you could rearrange the tent and maybe pick up a few toys.”

In all honesty, it would take much more than picking up a few toys. Bikes lay scattered all over the road, a makeshift “stop” sign stood erect on the right side, a large circle of chairs sat next to the sign, and a large tent with a grill perched beneath it rested near the center garden in the cul-de-sac.

“Of course,” the chunky woman cooed with an endearing Midwestern drawl. “I was just talking to your mom about what a big deal college football is around here.”

The woman said the last few words extra loud, enunciating each syllable, while looking at Mrs. Kaur.

“Yeah, I understand it’s big deal,” said Mrs. Kaur matching the white woman’s octave and adding her arms into the mix to demonstrate her understanding of big deal.

“But Manny has to go her lab. And, she can’t get car out of driveway.”

The white woman blanched a bit at being told off. She opened her mouth to speak, shut it, and then opened again.

Manny hated these conversations with the neighbors. Her family could never figure out the proper etiquette.

It was as if no matter how sweetly they spoke, no matter how wide their smiles were, and no matter how understanding they tried to be, it was always the Kaur family that was at fault.

“Listen Gina, I like this neighborhood has kids. I like seeing kids play here. It makes me feel young, you know, like when I have little kids.” Mrs. Kaur tried to explain. “But, this is public road, you know. Kid can’t always play and leave toys everywhere. Not safe.”

Another man had joined the circle, by this point, wearing a red hat with a slogan claiming to bring greatness back to the country. He was slimmer than the guy with the beer belly. The man with the red hat wore glasses and a crisp polo shirt. Manny couldn’t quite figure him out.

Last week, he smiled and waved at her, while hammering down the rods for his Trump 2020 banner. She went back in to the house fuming, but her mother only scolded her for being ungrateful because things could be worse.

She had an education and opportunity. If a small amount of racism was the price to pay for it, then her mother would happily pay the tax.

“Well, actually, Mrs. Kaur, it’s not a public road.” Gina gave a flip of her hair. “It’s a private road for the neighborhood. I’m assuming that you received my email, Mrs. Kaur, about how fast your family members tend to drive in the neighborhood. It’s extremely dangerous, and we don’t feel safe with our children out and about.”

The group had grown, such that they encircled Manny and Mrs. Kaur. Gina gave a self-important smile.

“We all drive 25 miles-per-hour on this road,” Manny answered for her mom, who was becoming a bit flustered.

She would keep a smile on her lips and a light air to her voice. It always went better, when she appeared to be docile.

“Well, that is the thing,” spat another man in the group, enunciating each word a little too harshly for the tone of the conversation. “The speed limit is actually 21 miles-per-hour.”

Manny’s smile slipped, unable to keep up the act. “There aren’t any signs that say the speed limit’s 21 miles-per-hour.”

She was an educated woman studying occupational therapy, and she was not going to just lie back and take this. Nevertheless, she could not show her frustration. “Generally, in neighborhoods and school zones, the speed limit is 25—”

“Well, our neighborhood is different,” a thin woman wearing too much eye makeup cut in. “We’re trying to protect our kids.”



“And one way to protect your kids is to keep them off of the road, rather than treating it like your backyard.”

Her voice went up an octave. It was this. The brazen, unabashed sense of ownership over a public space that left her dumbstruck. And unlike her mother, who believed things were at least better in the US than in India, Manny had the audacity to demand more than just “good enough.” The ringleader, Gina, put up her hands, a bit exasperated.

“Okay, okay let’s all calm down.” Gina turned back to Mrs. Kaur. “We’ll just move some of the kids to the side so your daughter can pass, but please do drive more carefully as I expressed in the email.”

Mrs. Kaur just nodded.

“Also, Mrs. Kaur,” Gina said, her face dropping in an apologetic smile, “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about all the cars you had out here a few weeks ago.”

“It was my other daughter’s engagement. I put on Facebook neighborhood page, and you say okay,” Mrs. Kaur said, her eyes widening.

“Right, I know, but you didn’t really give us a lot of time,” Gina said.

Manny clenched her fists, making sure to keep them at her side. A quote from her textbook flashed before her eyes: society tolerates micro-aggressions to further the oppressors narrative.

“I mean, you only told us the weekend before, and there were a lot of cars.” She drew out “a lot,” to make her point. It landed because every face in the gang, encircling Manny and Mrs. Kaur, nodded in unison.

“So, you telling me I need permission what two, three weeks before? Because four, five more cars on road for my daughter’s engagement? But, you take over whole road every week with no permission.”

Gina clasped her hands in front of her lips. Manny noted how angelic Gina looked in that moment, in perfect accord with western Renaissance paintings. How similar to their lives, in which the brown family never quite fit in the backdrop.

“Well, Mrs. Kaur, that was more of a private event right? And, this is like...public.”

“Ah! I understand. So, you do public event on your private road,” Mrs. Kaur’s accent thickened. “But, we don’t do private event in house and use private neighborhood road. Huh?”

It was very unlike her mother to brave a gang of suburban crewneck-sweater-wearers. Where was the woman so willing to bear the hostility and pay that patriot tax?

It would be years before Manny realized that this was the day her mother changed and recognized things were not so simple. It wasn’t just about jobs and opportunities, but about the ugly, hidden hurdles in between.

The man with the beer belly finally spoke up for his wife. “Okay, I think that’s enough.”

“It’s okay,” Mrs. Kaur stretched out the last word as she always did when irritated. “I’m just asking Gina question.”

Gina smiled at her husband. “It’s okay, hun.” She turned back, smiling at Mrs. Kaur. “Listen, Mrs. Kaur. I’m not trying to start anything here, okay? You just need to check with the HOA before organizing events, because your events tend to be quite large.”

Mrs. Kaur tutted. “Oh Gina, you are HOA. That email you send me. You say you give fine for my family drive too fast. You send email. Not HOA.”

Manny’s eyes threatened to bulge out of the sockets.

Gina blushed. She then squeezed her face into itself like a raisin and shook her head. “Oh, no, no, Mrs. Kaur. There’s a committee made up of multiple people from the neighborhood. There’s an entire election process.”

She looked around for encouragement.

“You should run next year, if you feel this passionate about neighborhood issues.”

Mrs. Kaur stared back at Gina. Manny only smiled. It was a naive idea given by a woman who was clearly out of touch with the Kaur family’s experience.

“Come on, Gina. Waste of time. No one here vote for me.”

Gina opened her mouth to say something, but only a small choked sound escaped her lips. Mrs. Kaur sighed. Manny sensed the defeat in her mother. She was not a formally educated woman.

Her mother came to the United States in her early twenties and worked labor intensive jobs her entire life to put her children through college. Throughout Manny’s life, she never heard her mother complain of her hard life, because despite it all she believed things were still better in the US.

Though the shift happened, sudden and abrupt. A sad truth Manny always knew deep down. Things were not that much better. Tucked neatly beneath the facade of equality, cradling the weight, hid prejudice and antipathy in plain view.



**PRIVATE
ROAD**

A rectangular white sign with a thick black border is mounted on a silver metal pole. The sign features the words "PRIVATE" and "ROAD" in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters, stacked vertically. The sign shows signs of wear, including scratches and scuffs, particularly on the right side. It is secured to the pole with four small metal fasteners, one in each corner. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with a yellow road line visible at the bottom.

“Let’s just go inside, mom,” Manny put her arms around her mom and shuffled her toward their new, unwelcome home. The home that would always feel new because it never quite accepted its new residents. The house that made water on the driveway freeze overnight, causing its residents’ cars to slide away by morning. The house that locked its doors, so that its residents could not enter until the locks were changed again.

And, now as its residents climbed up the steep driveway, a violent wind rushed at them from 29233 Stratfort Wood Valley. The neighbor’s large Trump 2020 sign posted at the property line sat unruffled. The bright leaves remained sedate, while Manny and Mrs. Kaur fought the windstorm.

Finally, the house, fatigued and unsettled, gasped only little gusts of wind here and there. The two women made their way to the large pillars that sat guard before the front door. Manny could feel the glares of the people huddled around the base of the driveway.

“By the way,” she turned to look over her shoulder, “your meat’s burning.” She turned back around and smirked. “And we’re not going anywhere,” Manny said under her breath, as she patted the ivory-colored pillar.

The house sighed.

“Oh fuck!”

“Just get them off the grill!”

“It’s okay, I like mine well done.”

“Fred! Grab the kids!”

Manny knew how it all worked.

She would be graded down for missing a lab and after weeks and weeks of explanations, the professor would still determine the lower grade was fair.

The kids would continue to run and play on the road, leaving their bikes and toys scattered all around like a little maze.

The barbecues would continue until the snow forced them inside, because winter didn't pick sides in their wars.

Mrs. Kaur would continue to notify the HOA of any of her events or any extra cars parked outside their house.

A week or maybe a month from now, the HOA would erect a sign that clearly stated the speed limit was 21 mph.



On Clutter



Jennifer Schneider

The clutter in the lower cabinet was overwhelming. No different than the stacks of paper that hid the chipped linoleum above. The cabinets to the right and left, too. I knew I'd tire quickly, so I set to work.

My first attempt to create order in a small corner of the kitchen revealed a stack of middle school social studies assignments. Crinkled corners contained maps inked of thick and thin strands of red and blue.

Tiny dots tell big stories of cultures near and far.

Travel on pause, my mind wandered. Journeys come in many shapes and sizes. Journals, too. I would have liked to study anthropology. I've learned that anthropologists study far away cultures to both understand and expand visions and views of the world.

Ants have castes and cultures of their own. The queen ant is responsible for founding colonies. Laying eggs, too. The sisterhood of worker ants manage pretty much everything else. Ants can be found on every continent, except Antarctica. The average annual temperature in the interior of Antarctica is -57 degrees Celsius, a bit too cold for ants. Not humans.

Anthropologists study there. Dr. O'Reilly is an example. The inhospitable climate notwithstanding. I wonder if she minds. Minds often wander. Wonder, too. Anthropologists study in Alaska, Asia, and Africa, too.

Asia is the largest and most populated continent. Africa, and its 54 countries, follows in second place.

Agriculture is arguably Africa's most critical economic activity. Two-thirds of the population rely upon it for employment. For each of its 54 countries, it contributes thirty to sixty percent of the GDP. Impressive math. More calculations, more A's. Of Africa's total land, a little more than 7 percent is arable.

Impressive math.

I wonder about abundance. Absolutes, too. History is often abstract. Analysis, too. The abacus has origins in Athens, its use predating adoption of the Arabic numeral system. The word Abacus comes from the Greek word for "tabular form" and was invented sometime between 300 and 500 BC.

So much history. So much standardization. Minds often wonder. Acreage in faraway lands an abstract concept. Story arcs often silent.

Impressive math.

So many A's. The apex of the U.S. grading scale. Hidden angles. Standard U.S. mathematics curriculum covers addition.

Not always the abacus. Standard U.S. science curriculum includes a unit on ants. Not agrobiolology or agrolology. Not agrizoiatry or ablution, either. Standard U.S. history curriculum includes units on Antarctica, too.

Not always Africa. So many angles.

COVID dealt us a new angle. All virtual, remote only learning.

Or so they say.

Learning always a matter of perspective. The setting changed yet the struggles only deepened. As did the dirty laundry. Layers of dust, too.

I continued to clean. There was little else that could simultaneously consume time and calm connecting nerves. Today I focused on my cabinets. Anything to stay busy and keep my mind off the news.

My lips pursed, gently blowing blankets of dust off stacks of saved paper. Many had been moved from the counter to the bottom cabinet in sweeps of years' past.

At a time when cleaning was synonymous with clearing. A time when we had places to go and places to be. Places that were not here. Not our kitchen.

I've been conditioned to conserve. Consume, too. Another idiosyncrasy of the American way. A country of immigrants. Memory of past struggles collide with shelves of dollar store consumables and cabinets with shelves to store.

We couldn't bear to part with the souvenirs and mementos. Items that came to be considered as valuable as the memories. Yet I also couldn't spare the counter space.

Ironies persist in all spaces. Mind, too.

Now I wonder why we placed any value on those shiny marks. Ignorance is bliss, but I've always suspected our system is built on rubbish. Bliss better some days than others. Amidst endless time inside, days blur.

The past and the present dance as the future remains unknown. A mystery. So many mysteries.



I grew up amidst mysteries - in spite or despite them. I was a learner who colored, poorly, in the lines while never wanting to. I was taught to comply, center all comments – no left or right justifications allowed, and never confuse my place with theirs.

Ideas mattered, of course, as long as the ideas were theirs. Not mine. Not of the mind. I grew up as a learner who defied normal conventions while never being permitted space for defiance.

Categorized as not normal, I became nobody.

Norms nurture naming conventions with little niceties for those who know how to color in the lines. Even those who don't want to. What I wanted wasn't allowed.

Even electives were graded. And grades allocated in pre-determined ways. Electives were reserved for period 7. Two times a week. In home economics we made pillows. All thirty of us girls. Across the hall, the boys learned to code.

In Binary. I want to be there. But thinking was binary, too.

I'd like to interview my twelve-year-old self. Ask her why she didn't do more with her suspicions and her desire to squash binary benchmarks. Stereotypes, too.

Bologna sandwiches, peanut butter on banana, and dime store soda pop. Even then, I complied and despised with regularity.

Conditioned and categorized, just as convention dictated.

I wonder, too, why I don't do more with what I now know, too. I know not how, though I know this doesn't suffice. Someone, please. Feed me. Vitamin A. B and C, too.

Lately I've worried about Vitamin D levels. For all of us. The doctor cautioned me. Said hers were in the toilet. Her language was suddenly personal, not clinical. Unsuspectingly crass.

Thanks for the feedback, I replied.

Feedback comes in many forms. Forms of many figures. Sometimes food. I grew up on stories of hot oatmeal turned over top heads of curls. The heat activated hair follicles, while the mess – discipline came with clean up duty – informed behavior.

Us children were well trained in the theory of behaviorism.

Now, I do what I can to change behaviors. Baselines, too.

It's my job, really. Though I'm not very good at it. Like I said, I do what I can. Only it's never enough.

At lunch, my colleagues express surprise when I cite a study that found close to forty percent of feedback negatively impacted student performance. Student confidence too.

I too felt surprise. The kind that lingers - in the small pockets of air between here and there. Between the text on the page and the time/text in the pockets of memory.

Suspicion, too.

No matter, I sweep suspicion aside and decline judgment in the same way I decline the cafeteria's oatmeal offerings.

I've done it before.

As a young girl, I was fed a diet of frozen TV dinners. First Salisbury steak and perfectly symmetrical heaps of mashed potatoes. I'd butter both and watch reruns of the Price is Right.

As I grew, the freezer's contents changed too. Lean Cuisines replaced Swanson. Tabatchnick minestrone soup swapped for Sara Lee pound cake. Tea and tabbouleh replaced Tator Tots and Tasty Cakes.

The refrigerator's contents changed, too.

Sticks of butter became small packets of condiments. Ketchup and mustard swiped from open trays at nearby 7-11's. Academic and mealtime conversations focused on calories and calculations. I was schooled on gender roles and expectations using the language of food.

The Price is Right persisted. Wheel of Fortune, too. I was told I was fortunate. Food, family, focus. By the time I was eleven I knew not to believe everything you are told.

Even so, I've consumed grades like goodness. Always craving goodness. We all did. Still do.

The letters danced in my mind. Good morning, good measure, good riddance.

COVID brought out the long-suppressed baker in me.

Dark chocolate ganache, chewy milk chocolate brownies, homemade chocolate ice cream. Far too much caffeine. Far too many books, too. Old addictions to paper, pinochle, and pinwheel cookies – chocolate covered of course - born anew. Only the cleaning still waits.

Yes, the cabinet called and it wasn't good news.



I flipped through a stack of grade school essays. Middle and high school pieces, too. Science fair forms. Rubrics. So many evaluative measures.

All out of context. Now. Years prior, too.

Context has always mattered.

Even so, I wonder. If context matters, for example, how do we reconcile standardized testing with pureed carrots, steam cauliflower, and processed franks?

Baseball for the boys and softball for the girls? Kick ball and kick the can? Home economics and AP macro?

We can't. We also don't have to. Systems cut out all middlemen. Women, too.

A peer-reviewed study found that when math problems were situated in sports, males outperformed females. When the same problems were situated in fact patterns of kitchen measurements and ingredients, females outperformed males.

On review, word problems are dominated by tales of football kicks, baseball throws, and basketball tosses.

We all judge. It's a part of human nature. We convert our judgment in evaluative ways.

Four stars for the local diner. Three eggs and bacon - \$2.99 special. The coffee strong and always hot. Three stars for the Grub Hub delivery. Uber drivers, Lyft, Airbnb.

Deals sweetened with keys secured in doorway lock boxes, wicker baskets of Whole Foods fruit - shiny red apples. Sometimes pears. The apples reminiscent of grade school sweeteners and teacher's pets.

Entire industries are built on ratings. Grades, too.

Upgrades taunt. A higher grade almost always associated with higher worth. Hotels.com, Triple A. As if one A weren't good enough.

Confusing, often conflicting, messages move mountains and make memories. Mondays, too.

I am also different as a student and a teacher.

As a student, I'm conditioned to crave high scores - and work towards them. Yet as an educator and teacher, I know they mean nothing.

Grades themselves are fundamentally flawed. Even their origins discriminate and evaluate in untoward ways. Why can't I reconcile and resolve my own cognitive dissonance with my own cognition.

Inspired, I did some reading. Only to end deflated. I followed all the rules - conducted searches of scholarly sources, read closely, took notes, synthesized.

A fifty-page lit review that I can summarize in one sentence. Grading systems are deeply flawed.

Essays that earn an A on Monday might easily score a B on Tuesday. Over lunch, I tell my colleagues about a study where 53 professionals were tasked with scoring grade 300 freshman essays using a 1-9 scale.

Not a single essay received fewer than five different grades.

We chew and swallow, take a drink from our water bottles, and nod. It's a bitter diet. We all want to do better, but don't always know how.



An inevitable reality of human instruction is that all individuals, including those with the best of intentions, have biases that impact their actions, often in discriminatory ways.

The earliest forms of grading were built in, on, and of stereotypes. Discrimination, too.

Now, in our newly digital only world and classrooms across the globe, sometimes all that one takes away is a grade.

There's less room for new friendships, hallway giggles, pre-class debates, after school clubs. Less time to share meals and commiserate over cafeteria specials.

Present day grading systems are no better than those of our past.

History tends to repeat itself, after all.

I struggle to find a balance, spending time developing detailed rubrics only to realize the walls were built long ago. Students log into courses and reveal deep wounds - I am terrible at math, awful with technology, scared.

Music plays, memories stir, muscles made of metrics and mathematics become identity.

There's a saying – by someone who matters, I am sure - that not all that counts can be counted. Yet what happens when what is counted counts and is also deeply flawed.

Studies have found bias in all forms.

Traits and author characteristics such as penmanship (Bull & Stevens, 1979), sex (Spear, 1984), ethnicity (Fajardo, 1985), likeability (Cardy & Dobbins, 1986), and attractiveness (Bull & Stevens, 1979; Landy & Sigall, 1974) all have the potential to impact the way an instructor interacts with and scores student work (Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

Instructor experience levels (Weigle, 1999) and the order in which student papers are scored (Farrell & Gilbert, 1960; Spear, 1996) can also impact an instructors' grading and feedback process (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). van Ewijk (2011), citing earlier studies, highlights a range of factors, including group stereotypes.

It's like digging for water - we all know it's there - and finding it. In the form of floods and high tide, and not being able to swim.

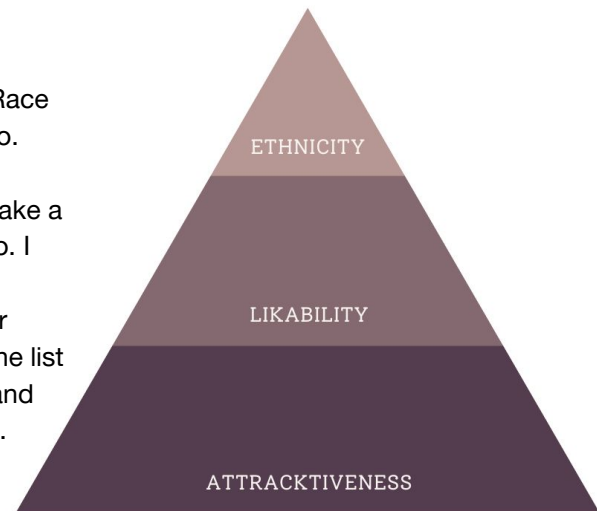
They say knowledge is power but in this case, even with the information, I feel powerless. Stuck in the deep end when I've never liked swimming.

Conditioned to judge myself and not liking what I see.

When I suggest a system with no grades, I receive a range of predictable replies and admonitions. Choruses of simultaneous agreement and shrugs. Accreditation requirements, policy, financial aid, SAP. All monikers of equally flawed systems.

I listen to Time Wise (his YouTube videos a recommended click; Dispatches from the Race War a must read) and wonder what I can do.

Sure, as JFK says, even one person can make a difference and everyone should try. So, I do. I offer revisions opportunities and flexible submission dates. I review assessments for ambiguity, student voice, and relevance. The list of small steps each of us can take is long and necessary – even if their impact feels small.



Sometimes I receive notes that propel me forward. Just today, a student wrote via email:

“The school called me and said that I did well this semester. My advisor was wondering what my recipe to success was. I simply said, the Professor gives me an assignment, and I complete it. I know that sounds funny at first glance but then we continued to discuss it a bit deeper. I said it comes down to good leadership I said on the first assignment ... took the time to explain to me that my title page could be adjusted and sent me a link to APA for title pages. You didn't necessarily take off points because you were willing to teach rather than just grade a paper. You gave me an opportunity to grow as a student and in turn I wanted to produce quality work.”

Yet systems persist. Policies, too. An administrative email that followed 10 minutes later reminded and reiterated late policy guidelines using boilerplate text.

For students that are the antithesis of boilerplate, grades can be inflated and boosted - extra credit, lowest score drops, revision opportunities - and deflated - bell curves, artificial time constraints, hard deadlines.

I sit on Zoom calls where grades are a frequent topic. And participants frequently judged. Grades continue to matter.

Minimum GPAs for program eligibility. Minimum GPAs for financial aid eligibility. Assessment of student worth based on arbitrary assessment delivered in isolated weeks and context-dependent moments in time.

I pulled another stack - a mix of old math and spelling tests. Lists of words to be memorized. Giant red numbers in thick marker scrawl. I remember the tears and the frustration. Thursday night practice for Friday morning exams. I remember, too, the year I stopped writing. At the time I blamed myself. No time. No ideas. No desire. Only now, decades later, do I blame a TA named Alfie.



He was smart, swift, and sarcastic. He also graded himself on a sphere far above me and my peers. He's haunted me for years. Even now I struggle to divorce my writing identity from his self-absorbed judgment. I wrote him recently. In an unsent, unpublished, uncensored way. A poem, which I suspect might make him cringe.

Dear Teacher was my title. And my opening to explore his long-lasting impact in one particular case – mine. He'd disapprove of my opening stanza, too.

Dear Teacher,

Forgive me. I cannot recall your name.

It begins with an H. Maybe an I. That is all I know.

Harry, Henry. Ira, Isaac... Maybe, *Herbie*. More likely, not.

I know not why I focus on H and I. Perhaps I long only to say Hi.

To let you greet a future, now present, Me.

One that almost never came to be. I wonder, too, how you'd respond

to my awkward, no awful, rhyme. Given your insistence on conventions. *Yours. Not Mine.*

Only now, twenty years after we first met, have I finally washed – No, Hidden - your identity

from my active neurons. *Mine. Not Yours.*

Still, your presence remains. Always. Watching as I write.

Eyes squinched, brow furrowed. Breath heavily scented

with stale coffee, butter rum life-savers,

and one-inch caramel squares. A small glass canister,
dusty then dusted – Kleenex always ready - hosted your fuel.

The yellowed pot-hole light casts a dim shadow over your desk.

Your office, up the two flights of stairs beyond the glass door hidden
a bit off West 8th. A faded “Writing Center” affixed in sticky decals
and scraped paint. Simpson stickers decorate the metal filing cabinet
in the far-right corner. You sit in the faux leather chair behind the wooden desk.
Cramped, always. Your long legs tied in knots beneath faded black denim
and almost sheer knees as raw knuckles
gripped your instruments – electric red preferred - and your fury – also electric.

Though your name escapes me, I know your presence. Always.

Even as I write, I hear your voice in my head. Reminding Me

... of my inferior prose.

... my poor syntax.

... my weak command of my pen.

The black ink engraved fountain that was a gift from my then boyfriend,

Who knew I dreamed of becoming a writer

And who later dumped me when he grew tired of my tears

... my inappropriate use of our language. *Yours, not Mine.*

... my unusual name. *Mine, not Yours.*

I still see the giant red D on my first essay,

the one I spent weeks on – Drafting, Crafting –

and then Sharing my Story –

My everything

... Mama and Papa.

... The House.

... The Secrets.

... The Pregnancy

... The Lost Pregnancy

... The Lies.

... My way Out. Mine. Not Theirs.

I told you everything.

And then you decided everything I told you was *Less Than*. That I was *Less Than*.

Me. Not You.

I feel the slap of the inked letter – like a smack of a loose baseball, foul of course –
Everywhere.

I see the curves of the inked letter – a blemish that shines bright on my fair skin -
Everywhere.

... as I coach my child with their own English homework. They say they dislike writing.

... as I shop in suburban mall sprawl, consuming text like water in a foreign desert. And a
foreign dessert.

... as I trade pleasantries – and mail - with block neighbors, and long for the anonymity city
streets

... as I listen to male colleagues claim first author spots on papers they did not write

... as I be Me.

I came to you with questions. And tears.

I left with gut wrenching doubts - that hit in swift succession –
and that would linger in my words and my being - Always.

I tried to look in your eyes – to find you –

But you saw only my text and my errors.

You scrawled your theory in bright red ink.

Fast and furious, no time to waste.

Part of me hopes you are no longer teaching.

Part of me hopes you are.

We need you, of course. Never enough teachers. Especially males.

Last I read 80% were female and fair skinned.

If only I had thicker skin.

Perhaps you would not haunt me so.

Me. Not You.

We don't need You, though.

Never did.

Always enough critics.

You. Not Me.

All of Me wishes You well.

All of Me wishes We could meet.

Revisit my crumpled mess of previously unshared secrets.

... I unwrap it from time to time. An old wound that refuses to heal.

Wipe the tear that always shows. Return the wrinkled sheet -

etched with lines that mark the passage of time and the depth

of the wound - to its more comfortable fetal form.

If We met, I'd share my most recent writing.

Just once. Indulge Me. Not You.

Go ahead – turn on your 15-minute sand timer. I’d understand.

We’re all on a timer. Except my timer is stuck on You.

Would You be surprised to know You haunt Me

... my emails

... my letters

... my published essays

... my company memos.

... my written self

... Me

I just remembered. Your name. It’s Alfie. Always, Alfie. Always, watching.

You – your Everything – came to me tonight. In my dreams

And my restlessness. As I dwelled on a current writing project.

Dewey talks often of the impact of a teacher.

Is this the impact you always dreamed of?

Dear, Alfie. Do you ever think of Me? Us? Not You?

Be well. Farewell. Until your tomorrow return.

For the longest time, I couldn't remember his name and also couldn't forget how he made me feel. It came to me, ultimately. Deeper awareness of his harm, too. Only it was far too late. I don't have answers. Though I do have questions.

My mind overwhelmed with clutter.

My cabinets, too.

**L.G.B.T.Q. Community
Building: Tension and
Harmony**



Feng Shi

(Feng Shi is a Critical Care Clinician from Western New York. He also worked as a biomedical research scientist with a solid scientific publication record. Feng's writings will continue to address social and cultural issues through the LGBTQ perspective.)

This article will address some challenges unique to L.G.B.T.Q. community building (Here, L.G.B.T.Q. includes the broadest spectrum of non-binary sexual identity).

Organized L.G.B.T.Q. Movements have become a widespread phenomenon and L.G.B.T.Q. organizations now are integrated components in many communities.

Community building is a central and long-sought goal in the L.G.B.T.Q. movement. Commonly referred to as the "Pride Center", a local L.G.B.T.Q. organization that can be easily spotted in all major metropolitan areas and many smaller cities and towns.

Other types of L.G.B.T.Q. organizations also exist at the community level. The dynamic between an individual and the community is vital to the well-being of L.G.B.T.Q. persons.

While community work is an uplifting experience, it is also challenging and highly frustrating. Folks joining and falling off from the community are everyday experiences; activist groups rising and split are also often revealed in the documentation.

This article is organized into three themes related to the dynamics in L.G.B.T.Q. community building: the gap between the equality mission and the structural hierarchy of an organization; advocacy and diverse social needs of L.G.B.T.Q. communities may require distinct social platforms; an overview of L.G.B.T.Q. organization models.

These themes are presented in the format of open questions, followed by stories from our local communities. The article will conclude with the concept that equality is experienced at two levels in L.G.B.T.Q. community settings.

The three themes:

Theme 1: Equality is at the core of the L.G.B.T.Q. Movements. It is the foundation of every L.G.B.T.Q. organization's mission statement. When the L.G.B.T.Q. community unites as a whole and fights for equality; well-organized campaigns are powerful.

However, organizations must be constructed with some degree of hierarchy. All organizations face competition for resources and priority.

I believe that there is an intrinsic gap between the mission statement ("equality") and operational models ("hierarchy") in L.G.B.T.Q. organizations.

Hence, I ask whether this gap is one of the causes responsible for the tension and political conflicts between an equality-driven organization and the community being served.

Theme 2: There are two fundamental functions of L.G.B.T.Q. groups and organizations: advocacy and social support.

It is easy to understand that the bigger and better structured an organization is, the more powerful it is in advocating for L.G.B.T.Q. rights.

We have witnessed the effectiveness of collective effort in winning the battle of same-sex marriage. L.G.B.T.Q. individuals also seek social support from communities.

It is known that social support comes from several aspects, including informational, emotional, esteem, networking, and tangible support (sources #1).

Therefore, I ask how different groups and organizations play roles in providing social support to L.G.B.T.Q. communities and individuals.

Theme 3: Gay bars and a few activism-centered organizations were the only viable formats in early L.G.B.T.Q. community development. Today various types of organizations and groups co-exist.

They include (1) Local organizations, such as a typical pride center; (2) National and international organizations with local chapters. For example, a group of three individuals or families can start a local chapter of P.F.L.A.G. (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). These chapters may operate autonomously at the community level; (3) Smaller and informal ad-hoc groups, such as book clubs, movie groups, novel internet, and social media groups.

Some are long-lasting, while some expire after the need has been served. The characteristics of various L.G.B.T.Q. organizations and groups are summarized in graph #1.

This overview reflects my personal experience in North America.

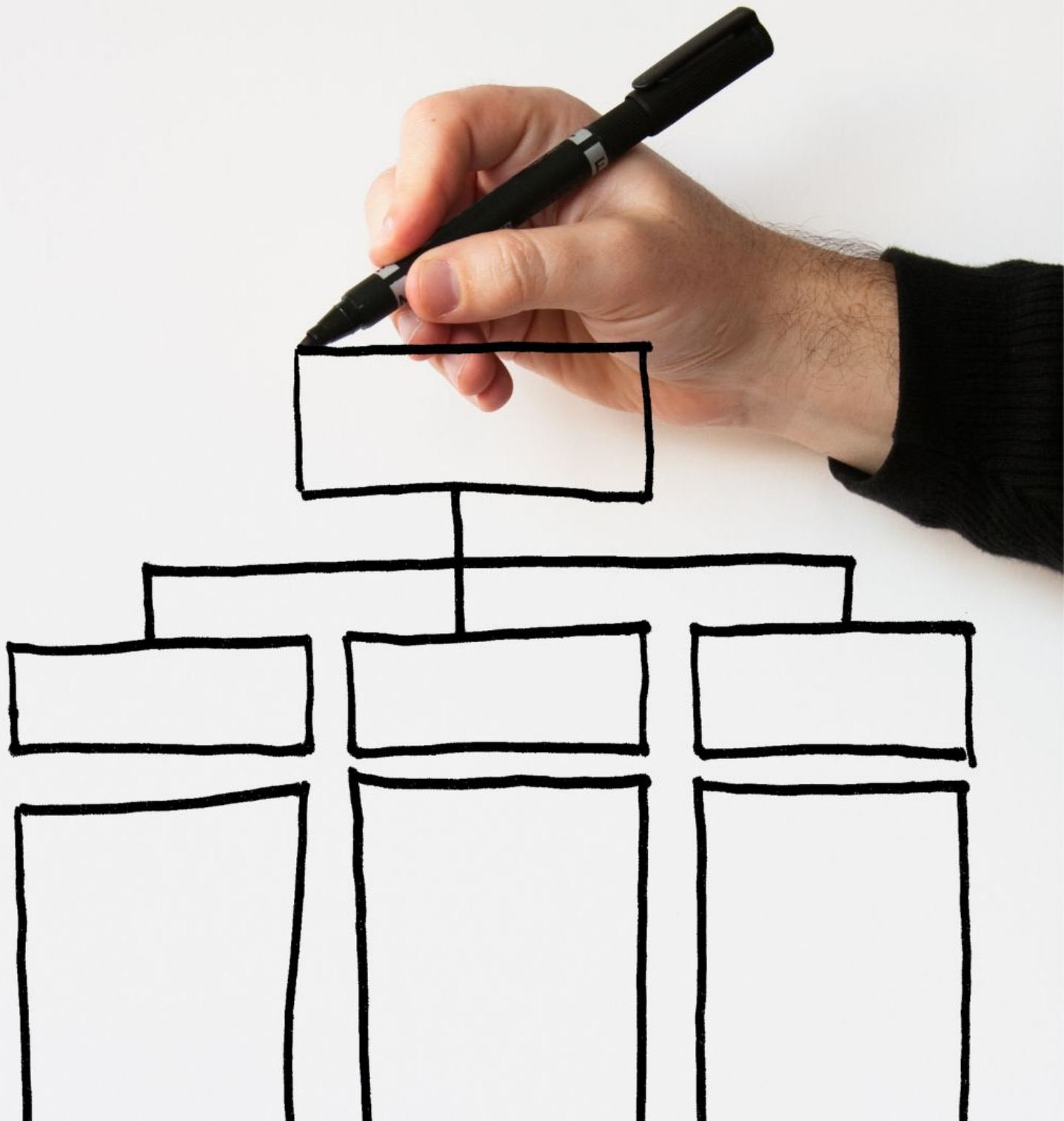
My third question is whether L.G.B.T.Q. communities are growing like an eco-system with heterogeneous groups and organizations complementing one another.

L.G.B.T.Q. Organization Models
Type A: Traditional Organizations

Type B: Small Informal Groups
Well established
Less structure & more flexible
Hierarchy structure
Friends and family like circle
Powerful in advocacy
Advantage in intimate
Advantage in resources, personal connection, infrastructure

Type C: Organizations with Local Chapters
Central organizations: well structured and powerful
Local chapters: informal, autonomy and intimate connection





LGBTQ Organization Models

Type A: Traditional Organizations

**Well established
Hierarchy structure
Powerful in advocacy
Advantage in resources
& infrastructure**

Type B: Small Informal Groups

**Less structure & more flexible
Friends and family like circle
Advantage in intimate
& personal connection**

Type C: Organizations with Local Chapters

**Central organizations: well structured and powerful
Local chapters: informal, autonomy and intimate connection**

Graph 1

In the following section, I will recount some stories from our local L.G.B.T.Q. community. The questions proposed above are doubtlessly open ones.

The sole purpose of telling these true stories is to illustrate the questions. I invite readers to echo their personal experiences, re-digest, and infuse insights along the way.

Stories behind the questions:

Story 1: The tension between the Western New York Pride Center and the founding members of Silver Pride Project

Silver Pride Project in Buffalo, NY was initiated in 2014 under the Western New York Pride Center (W.N.Y. Pride Center).

Its goal is to address the social isolation of the local L.G.B.T.Q. Aging population. In the beginning, it ran as an informal and member-driven group, with minimal direct involvement from the Pride Center. The early members were connected like a friend circle.

I recently published an article addressing the rising of this group (sources #2). As the group continued to grow, the tension between the Pride Center and the group surfaced.

The members of Silver Pride felt that regulations were too tight. Some of their requests, including participation in Buffalo Pride Parade, was not granted; and some seemed to have met unnecessary hurdles.

The W.N.Y. Pride Center is a subdivision of the Evergreen Health Services. Evergreen is a healthcare facility that was started in 1983 in response to the AIDS crisis.

Today it has expanded into a comprehensive healthcare system with a focus on serving underprivileged populations.

Healthcare facilities are among the most heavily regulated institutions and thus often well-structured. The "chain of command" is a reporting mechanism commonly utilized in healthcare facilities.

When I volunteered for Evergreen's Buddy program a few years ago, I had to provide flu vaccination and auto insurance documentation.

A few hours of training were mandatory, and the program coordinator supervised the first meeting with the client. These highly regulated programs are all necessary for Evergreen—and operation overhead and red tape are also apparent.

Competition for resources and priority among established and emerging programs within the institution must be keen.

I speculate that, as a new program, Silver Pride Project had difficulty gaining a high priority.

The sense of being an *equally* valued program was robbed by the founding members of Silver Pride.

The idea of member-driven community building is firmly rooted in Silver Pride folks.

The reality hurt! In September 2018, members broke off and formed an independent group named Rainbow Seniors Visible & Proud (R.S.V.P.).

Please refer to graph #2, which highlights the structure and relationship between these organizations.

This split is recent history. T

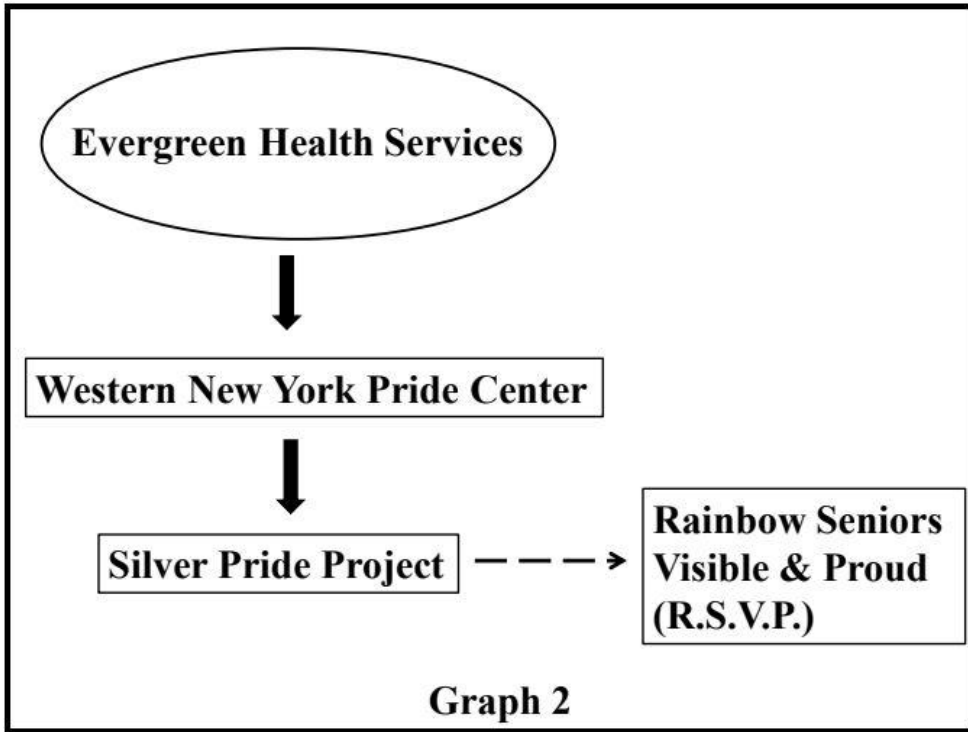
he unsettled feeling still surges from time to time in the community. In my view, there is no villain responsible for the division.

Part of the root is the inescapable disparity between the idea of being equal and the hierarchical structure of an organization.

In this instance, Evergreen happens to be an organization with a robust hierarchical operation model.

I want to emphasize that hierarchy in this article bears two meanings: (1) the administrative structure of the institution; (2) Community needs and programs are not weighted equally.

Based on its short-term and long-term goals, an organization must prioritize its programs. For an expansive organization, its priority task is paramount.



Evergreen Health Services
Western New York Pride Center
Rainbow Seniors
Silver Pride Project
Visible & Proud (R.S.V.P.)

Story 2: The long-term future of R.S.V.P.

Since its establishment, R.S.V.P. has made a sincere effort to build its own identity and structure. The group had a strong showing in the 2019 Buffalo Pride Parade, with over 50 members marching together. Their beautiful float was one of the highlights at the festival.

Its first-anniversary dinner party gathered about 90 people and warmed a chilly northern autumn evening.

The group was first led by a small steering committee and later by an Interim Board consisting of 10 members. The excitement of becoming an independent organization with official 501(c) status was palpable.

In its very first group-wide member meeting, I stood up and asked what would ensure that this group maintains a member-driven operational model.

The answer was: "We will!"

We all understood the root from which this group sprouted.

However, that did not answer my question. I belong to the future generation that may benefit from the work of R.S.V.P. Thus, I am interested in and concerned about its distant future.

I went online and found the Mission and History of Evergreen Health Services: "Evergreen Health, formerly AIDS Community Services, was founded by a *handful of volunteers* in 1983 to address the H.I.V. and AIDS crisis in Western New York."

On the website of the W.N.Y. Pride Center, I found its origin: "In 1998, a *group of community members and LGBTQ+ business owners* concerned by the challenges facing the Buffalo L.G.B.T.Q. community formed the Gay & Lesbian Coalition." (Both citations were retrieved on 8/19/2019).



Both organizations set out as small community groups. As any equality-driven group, they would have also had promised, without any hesitation, that their groups were member-driven, and everyone coming through the door would be valued equally.

Both have made significant contributions to the Buffalo L.G.B.T.Q. Community during the last 20-30 years.

However, today a subset of the population in the community feels their voices are not being heard and subsequently have decided to break off. We now know that is story #1 sketched in this article.

At this point, I invite readers to revisit graph #1 presented at the beginning. This overview of L.G.B.T.Q.

Organizations were composed from my personal perspective. When an organization begins to grow and ramp up its structure, I wonder whether it might maintain the features of both type A and type B organizations in graph #1.

Besides R.S.V.P. and Silver Pride Project, I am also a member of Buffalo Front Runners, another local gay group.

The group initially registered with International Front Runners in 1989. Currently, the group has over 80 members paying the annual dues.

Its working model is straightforward: centered on running and walking every Sunday and Tuesday.

Social activities are arranged after the exercise hour. In the summer, backyard picnics are very popular, organized and 100% contributed by the members.

Buffalo Front Runners occasionally ventures out of its routine.

After learning of the termination of the Gay 5K, it sponsored a Fun Run during 2019 Buffalo Pride Week, which was advertised through the Pride Center.

In contrast to Evergreen and W.N.Y. Pride Center, Buffalo Front Runners' longevity lies on its simplicity: informal and solely focusing on social support.

With only a few facilitators, its organizational structure is very flat.

Many members see the group as a family to them. It belongs to the type B groups, and it is a local chapter of type C organizations (graph #1).

Though much less known than Evergreen and the Pride Center, it can easily attract 20-30 people to its social events, not to mention a history almost parallel to Evergreen.

Back to my question regarding the future of R.S.V.P.: it remains unanswered.

Story 3: Silver Pride Project vs. R.S.V.P.

Today, Silver Pride Project and R.S.V.P. function in parallel, and both are going through a developmental phase.

Many folks in the community feel that the two groups, though wearing different name tags, share the same vision and goals and serve the same community.

Rod had been the main organizer of the Silver Pride since its beginning in 2014. In August 2019, as I was formatting the three themes of this article, Rod and I struck up a chat on Facebook.

He expressed that hopefully, "R.S.V.P. and Silver Pride can co-exist to benefit our seniors. R.S.V.P. is very good at organizing events.

That leaves Silver Pride more time and resources to advocate for services for L.G.B.T. seniors." I shared my draft and asked him to look over the themes and graph #1. He responded, "It looks quite interesting."

Silver Pride Project is officially supported by Evergreen and W.N.Y. Pride Center, two well-established type A organizations. Hence, it has the potential advantages in funding, professional staff support, and other significant tangible resources, such as transportation and housing.

After the split, it was natural for Rod to do some inventory and then realize that the two groups possess different assets. R.S.V.P. excels at organizing social events.

Its Facebook group page is packed with weekly pop-up activities, such as meal gatherings, movies, picnics, and organized field trips.

The vibrancy of its social activities is, at least in part, due to the fact that R.S.V.P. presently maintains the features of an informal group (type B group). The events are essentially friend circle socials and organized by enthusiastic and empowered members. Events organized by the Pride Center may need serious considerations of other factors, including liability, confidentiality, disability accessibility, etc.

Whether R.S.V.P. may be able to retain its flexibility, in the long run, will largely depend on the direction it will aim at cultivating its friend circle environment or evolving into a formal well-structured organization.



Once an organization acquires sizable funding, regulations and liability concerns will begin to mount.

Pop-up events, backyard picnics, and ride-sharing may eventually feel the wrapping of red tape. It appears that, for the time being, Silver Pride Project and R.S.V.P. are parallel organizations.

At this point, I want to bring up theme #2 presented in the beginning. In my opinion, advocacy and social support are the two critical domains for L.G.B.T.Q. communities. Sooner or later, they will land proper venues.

My view of L.G.B.T.Q. organization models (presented in graph #1) leans towards the possibility that Silver Pride Project and R.S.V.P. could steer towards different objectives with the support of the same community body.

Should we revisit this story in the next 10-20 years, the who's who in this community would be clearly revealed.

Story 4: Evergreen/W.N.Y. Pride Center vs. Rochester Pride Center

Rochester, NY, is only an hour car ride from Buffalo, and thus some local community members have life experience in both cities. Rochester Pride Center was established in 1973, officially named the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley, and now branded as Out Alliance.

Since W.N.Y. Pride Center at Buffalo is a subdivision of Evergreen Health Service, here we refer to them as Evergreen/W.N.Y. Pride Center. As noted by some folks, the dynamic between the leading L.G.B.T.Q. organizations in these two cities and their corresponding communities is quite different.



Evergreen has advanced substantially in the past 30 years. Today it has become a large, encompassing, and influential organizational structure.

Its 2018 revenue was \$745.9 million with expenses of \$702.8 million: it collected a net income of \$43.1 million (2018 Annual Report, Evergreen Health Services).

As a part of Evergreen, the W.N.Y. Pride Center does not report separately. For non-profit healthcare facilities in the U.S., the average operating margin in 2018 was 1.7% (sources #3), a very vulnerable number for organization development.

A sustainable mark should be at 2.5% or above. Evergreen's operating margin was 5.8% in 2018 (and 3.5% in 2019), a very impressive mark, offering superior stability.

To achieve such a performance, its priority task, I believe, is to be highly competitive.

Now let us look at the annual report from Out Alliance, the Pride Center in Rochester.

In 2017, it had a revenue of \$692,978 and an expense of \$694,214 (2017 Annual Report, Out Alliance; its 2018 and 2019 Annual Reports did not have detailed finance numbers). Noticeably its net income was barely even, yet it continues to keep the Empty Closet in print, which is the longest-running L.G.B.T.Q. newspaper in New York State.

As a common community member, I do not have the resources or the access to provide detailed operational information for these two organizations. But the number, by itself, is a story!

The purpose of comparing the numbers is to reflect on the potential implication of the organization models in the local community-building process. A friend of mine commented: Evergreen operates more like a centralized hub. It absorbed a few local agencies during its expansion.

On the contrary, Out Alliance tends to provide a collaborative platform for local groups. The details and feelings are subjected to each community member's experience, which is not within the scope of this article. On the contrary, this article is an effort to scrape the drama off the surface and reveal the root cause underneath.

Conclusion: Equality is perceived from two different perspectives

I always enjoy a small social circle for its warm, easy, and equal feeling. Once a group gains ambition and begins to expand, that feeling, in my experience, is often dampened.

Equality is taught to us so hard that, without exaggeration, it has almost burned into the genome of L.G.B.T.Q. individuals and communities. In my opinion, equality is experienced in two levels in our communities:

- (1) When we unite and fight for equality, the bigger and better organized a group is, the more powerful it will appear to the outside world;
- (2) An individual or one subset group experiences as an equal member within the L.G.B.T.Q. community.

The second level is better perceived when the structure of a group or organization is flat, which is more feasible for the smaller and less formal groups. I express the dilemma like this: I want to join a big parade to let the world hear our voices loudly, while I also enjoy a small backyard party when my whisper can be heard by my peers.

The real world is not as clear-cut as my expression. These two layers' of equality experience are usually compound.

We may attain a sense of balance between the two. However, often enough, we can feel confused, as realizations of these two experiences arise on very different —almost contrasting— social stages. And that may lead to frustration, even hurt.

Experiencing equality is undeniably a high priority among all social needs L.G.B.T.Q. persons seek in the community.

As being stated in my second theme, social support is known to include various domains.

I speculate that diverse social needs may appeal to distinctive social platforms.

If we look around, we may realize that groups of large, small, and mixed prototypes already cohabitate in our community; they each serve a unique purpose.

Both established organizations and emerging groups constantly seek new space and innovation to support our community. It would be beneficial, in my belief, if we have a more comprehensive answer to my second question.

In my last question, I proposed a rudimentary overview of L.G.B.T.Q. organization models, the composition of which sprung from my individual experience and reflection. In addition, to organization operational methodology (which is not the focus of this article), we should welcome the in-depth, multi-perspective, even professional examination of our community landscape.

Above all, as an ordinary community member, I firmly believe that the community's needs are powerful.

These needs will ultimately drive the force carving the landscape of the community. Some small groups resist being absorbed by the larger organizations.



Story #1 in this article illustrated the spin-off of R.S.V.P. from the Pride Center.

I believe these are examples of the community's self-correction. One of my friends optimistically proposed that groups and organizations of diversiform might foster one another and benefit our community as a whole.

What happens in the mainstream political arena can be exhausting just to watch.

So I shut off the T.V. and turn to our community. I hoped for unison.

However, I realize that the L.G.B.T.Q. community is a micro-cosmos: it has its own Ying and Yang, and its struggle and path to reach balance and harmony.

(The author thanks Linda Banas, Bill Engelbrecht, Barbara Goldman, Yuan Jiang, Raymond Kwan, Xuenan Li and Michael St. John for helpful feedback.)

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BRAVE

LIVE AND

THE FUTURE IS

Solution Soup: *Careful it's Hot*



Re: City Hall / School Board Meeting. Student Scripts, Coaching Notes (Tuesday at 4)

Loudly: Hello, Sir. Have we met before?

Carefully Crafted: Consummate for whom, I'd like to know.

Perfect Antidotes: Do you know our zip code?

Confidently: We're not for sale. Are you?

Slowly: Do you hear the rumble?

Ready: Who writes those, anyway?

Visit: Stay awhile. Show us that you really care.

Re: City Hall / School Board Meeting. Student Solutions (Tuesday at 7)

Speakers in suits promote their solutions – *Loudly* – at volumes even our pods and headphones don't know - in classroom auditoriums, city hall meetings, campaign crawls, and radio podcasts.

Solutions – innovative schools - to heal the wounds, close the gaps, and meet our needs.

Hello, Sir. Have we met before?

Solutions to the vandalized signs, indigo inked graffiti, and sub-par test scores that stain our school name - left hanging, dangling, taunting all who look.

Eyes open, now. No time to sleep. But first you must choose to See.

See our dated and coverless books.

See our shelves stacked with torn pages, faded black ink on white pages that bear unfamiliar surnames, and sagging – though not expanding - middles.

See our warped wood, splintered edges, and penny collections – no spare nickels, dimes or quarters for us - in the tin cookie jar. The one hidden on shelf three.

See our heads scratch as we read odd tests that speak of garages, parakeets, and souffles.

Speakers in ties promote their solutions – *Carefully Crafted* – with word dances, moves, and tricks even our favorite songs, dancers, and playbooks don't know – in stacks of white paper, legal folders, and court filings. Student-focused, consummate proposals, you say.

Consummate for whom, I'd like to know.

Speakers in button downs flaunt their solutions – *Perfect Antidotes* – to fix schools we call home.

Solutions that fire Mrs. B., Mr. H., and Ms. J. - Each with a tenure of 15, 10, and 12 years.

Solutions in the form of typed memos, tear drops in trash cans, and muffled replies to questions.

Will your velour hooded coats, tweed blazers, and black satin umbrella catch our tears?

Our halls echo. Don't look now. It's raining sadness – and it's not pretty.

Who will remember our birthdays now that Mr. I. is gone?

Who will tell me I matter now that Ms. R. is gone? My morning greeter. She'd call if I didn't

... show. I showed up. Every day. For Ms. R. Who do you show up for, Mr. Speaker?

Who will hand out band aids now that Mr. P. is gone? A stack in his right front pocket. Stuffed.

Do you know our zip code?

Speakers with cars dangle their solutions – *Confidently* – but take away our lifelines.

I sit in the classroom chair, the one that squeaks – even when I remain still - and read your tests.

Pages detailing another world. Questions on country homes and flowers in yard.

... Mr. Speaker – what do you think grows here?

Math calculations on airplanes and miles flown, while my mind lives a different story,

... with different kinds of calculations.

Calculations of weekly wages, circulars, and market sales – milk, eggs, diapers, cheese.

Calculations of bus schedules, siren distance and corner playgrounds, as Mama and baby play.

Calculations of broken swings, rusted metal fencing, and dealers looking for a quick sale.

We're not for sale. Are you?

Speakers in wing-tipped shoes. Stop acting. Just for a moment.

Unbutton your satin shirts. Loosen your silk ties. Take off your leather shoes.

And let's talk - *Slowly*. Do you hear the music? The neighborhood church bells, the sidewalk raps – timed to the traffic lights - and the red robins in song.

We're hungry. For food. Mondays were pizza day. Tuesdays were soup.

Chicken noodle is my favorite. What's yours?

We're hungry. To learn. Astronomy, African literature, Anatomy.

We're scared. sirens roar, gun laws falter, opioids win.

We're strong. We've toiled with pots, pans, and iron tea kettles
for far too long. It's time for us to move on. Reimagine our days
beyond the trance-like state your Solutions have washed
upon us.

The Number 4 train is leaving - We need you with us. Not against us.

Do you hear the rumble?

Teach taught us zero-sum games. Mr. P. preferred games of logic and skills.

Not chance. *Chess. Checkers. Othello. Life.*

We'd read Othello. Shakespeare spoke to all of us.

"Oh, Speaker. What say you now?"

Our classrooms were more real and more faire - than the game of Life. Ours, not the board game.

No one made a move until the sand timer and pocket watch said *Ready.*

Are you ready to play?

Speakers in suits - you evaluate our teachers objectively,
on the basis of scores on your strangely written tests.

Who writes those, anyway?

Yet you fail to realize that we aren't objects. Not pawns, bishops, or rooks.

Do you play chess?

We talk of college and business. We've got Big Dreams. And they are lovely.
But also lonely, even more so of late.

Oh, Mr. Speaker. We plead our case before you.

... Fix our buildings. Our band rooms. Our streets.

We know the notes, but need the keys.

Order our books. Shakespeare, hooks, Freud. Grisham, maybe?

Learn our languages. We're multi-lingual. English, Spanish, Swahili, more.

Speakers in ties - You close our public schools and argue for "choice"

... charters and vouchers

When we're fighting real fights in our own ring

... breakfast versus lunch, walks down Avenue A or B, and homework versus wage work

Speakers in painted smiled - You impose policies – *test this, assess that, document, drop, add* –

yet you've never walked our peppered streets,
tripped on our uneven sidewalks, ran through our school doors seeking safety,
or played at the courts – *basketball, not judicial* - where we work through our problems –
or sat on the brick porch steps while we watch for the city bus,
waiting, watching, hoping for something or someone that understands us.

Speakers argue solutions, but where's our choice?

Our public schools are not broken.

Our streets maybe - cobblestone, asphalt, concrete cracks. Everywhere.

Feed us. Shelter us. Touch us. We don't bite.

Unlike mosquitos, night rats, and bitter winds.

Shake our hands. Gloved or not.

Come for a visit. Stay. A while. Show us that you really care.

Re: City Hall / School Board Meeting. Student Reflections (Tuesday at 11)

After Speaker left, I baked a cake. To bid farewell to Mr. P,

Ms. J, Mr. T., Us.

Vanilla buttercream icing. Rich chocolate cake. A raspberry center.

Bittersweet. Wide eyes consumed the delectable treat as tears

Dropped, then pooled on the ground.

A tiny mouse darted left, then right. Decided to leave the crumbs to us.

Re: City Hall / School Board Meeting. Student Dreams (Wednesday at 3 AM)

In my dreams, I dreamt my life was my dream and my dreams were my life.

In my dreams I dreamt of world where living was not a crime and a crime was not living.

Only if...

In my dreams, I dreamt of a world where our neighborhood school bells rang
and my alarm remained set for the two minutes I needed to walk to the corner.

Only if...

In my dreams, I tossed and turned.

Fearful I may have said something wrong.

Fearful the final bow, the closing bell, the lock and chain on our school's
Front door, the farewell hug – I still feel the warmth of Ms. B's heavy arms
Around my lanky body – her sobs, her chuckle, her warning to be good –
Are my fault.

Wet, tired eyes bore

No hatred, only questions.

Speaker, please. Why us?

Our only crime is living.



CATALYST: **SYSTEMS CHANGE**

EDITOR - DR CRYSTALLEE CRAIN

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