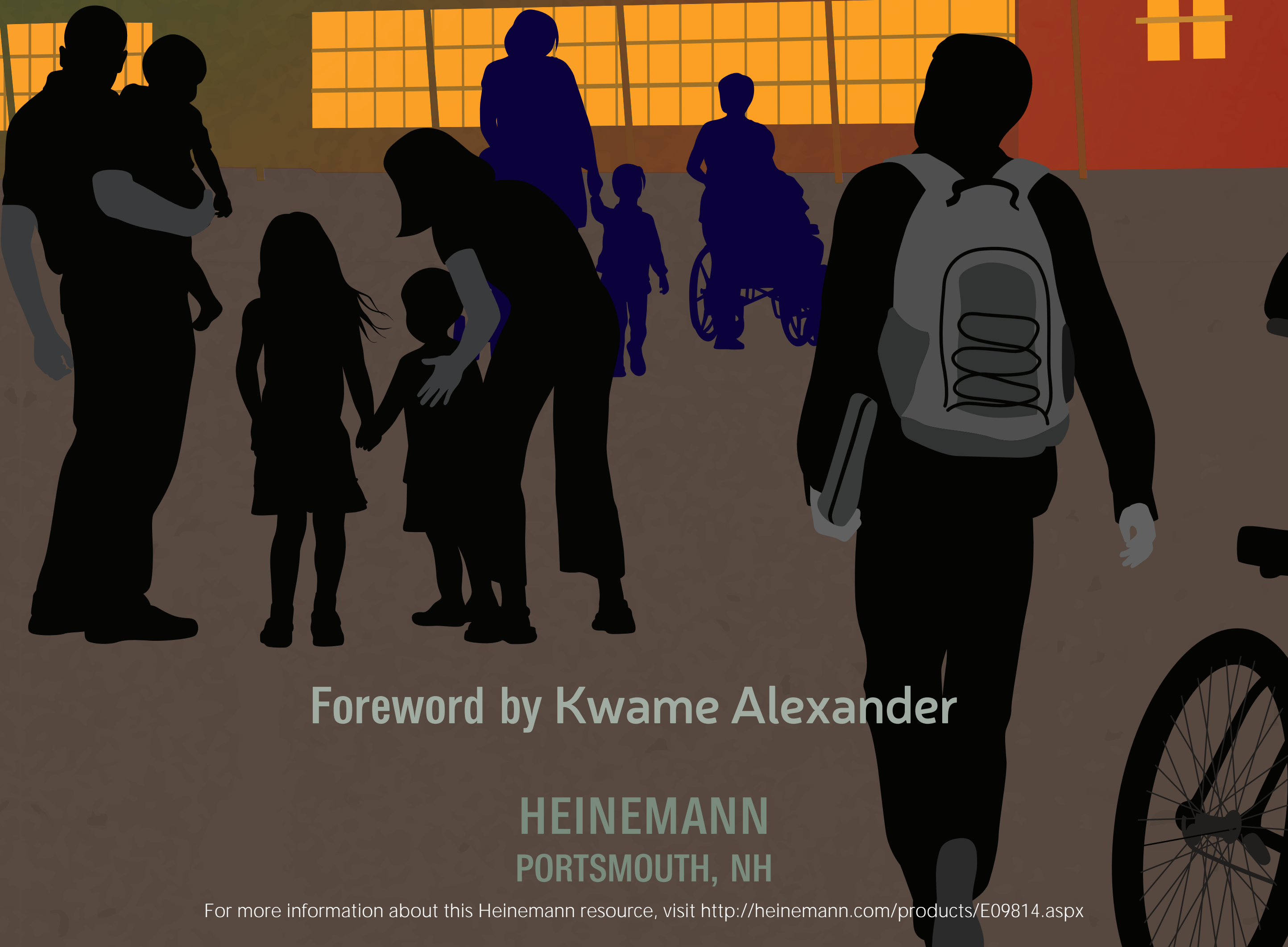
CORNELIUS MINOR

WE GOT THIS.

Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be



Foreword by Kwame Alexander

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For Edna Zoe Freeman, who taught a nation, and for Hawa and Cornelius, who crossed an ocean with those teachings, and for Zoe and Kass and Tino and Matti and Soleil and Indi and Xander. May you continue to be all that the ancestors dreamed that you would be.

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Foreword

"The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves."

—Paulo Freire

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD CORNELIUS MINOR SPEAK WAS three years ago in a dimly lit room at the International Literacy Association (ILA) annual convention. In the wake of the July 6, 2016, killing by a police officer, of Philando Castile, a thirty-two-year-old black American, ILA courageously programmed a last-minute literacy and social justice–themed breakout session. Cornelius was the co-presenter. The mood around the conference, around the country, was dark. It was all blues. But where there's some love, there's always some hope, and when I happened upon the remote room where Cornelius was spreading his love of literacy as empowerment and action, as a tool for social justice in the classroom, I could hardly get in the room, let alone find a space to sit on the floor.

He stood in front of the standing-room-only crowd of educators and concerned human beings poetically, patiently, and powerfully grappling with classroom equity, privilege, and prejudice—all deep and explosive issues.

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His cadence was comforting. His confidence was assuring. And his unyielding compassion was addictive. If this were a living room concert, he was most definitely the crooner and the trumpet. For sure, America is dark sometimes, but the blues is also about the healing spirit. And Cornelius brought the light.

We all sat listening and learning, not only being charged to resist the way things have been done, to disrupt the status quo, but we were guided toward a sustainable change, and more importantly we were armed with accessible tools and strategies. I'd never heard of Cornelius Minor before that afternoon, but in that room, in that moment, I sat spellbound, captivated, and captured by his vision and leadership, by his pedagogy and activism. As he says, "Change is participatory," and I, like everyone else, embraced his revolution, our revolution: to teach "young people to create opportunity for themselves, *and* teach them to do that work responsibly," and to expect "miracles six periods a day."

This primer supports teachers who want to get on the floor and dance to the beat of classroom equity and access. It's for educators who want to move from culturally responsive theory to practice. It's really a chance to sit in the room with a voice that vibrates with hope and humanity. Like Paulo Freire, Cornelius believes deeply that the social conditions of children should not limit their education access and opportunity. He knows that communities must be empowered to battle society's constraints and pressures, and this book, with its timely questions and thoughtful answers, with its storytelling and strategies, is a weapon for combat. *We Got This.* is meaningful and compassionate literacy. So, come on in the room. Grab a spot on the floor. And let this book be your new jam.

Kwame Alexander
Newbery Medal winner for *The Crossover*
Author of *The Write Thing: How Kwame Alexander Engages Students in Writing (and You Can Too!)*; *Rebound*; *Solo*; *The Playbook*; and *Booked*

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Acknowledgments

IN *THE SOCIOLOGY OF ART*, ARNOLD HAUSER SAYS THAT "every artist expresses himself in the language of his predecessors" (2011, 30).[1] In this, I am no different. There are so many people who have made this work possible—who have made me possible.

When I express love, it is because the Minors, the Crocketts, and the Johnsons taught me how to be it. Mommy, Daddy, Zoe, Kass, Soleil, Indira, and Swami, you all are everything.

When I express creativity, it is because the children of New York City challenged me to embody it. Much love to every young person at MS 331 in the Bronx and to each kid at the Brooklyn School for Global Studies. You encountered a young dreamer and you would not let me rest until I became an active doer. Thanks to my colleagues. You all made me. Ainate Yiaueki, every lesson that I teach carries your fingerprint. I will always be your coteacher. The PTA mothers at Global, you all kept me alive. You read me books and made me eat sensibly and tolerated my skateboarding and demanded that I never stop striving to be the educator that the children needed me to be. Everything that you all did for me . . . it mattered. It still does.

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1. Hauser, Arnold. 2011. *The Sociology of Art*. Translated by Kenneth J. Northcott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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When I express insight, it is because Kathleen Tolan, Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, Audra Robb, and the entire team at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project created the space for me to attain it. You all crafted opportunities for me to teach until I was clear and study until I was certain, and then you taught me to stand in front of others and to be myself. You all opened doors for me, and as I grew, you nudged me to be bold enough to cut my own keys and to eventually open those doors for myself and for others. Thank you. There will be more young educators, like me, who will arrive at your doorstep with heart and potential and unorthodox vision. They will need your ears and your support. I hope that we will always have a home at TCRWP.

When I express bravery, it is because the Bowen United Methodist Church community, the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University family, and the #EduColor collective made sure that I always exemplified it. Schools, communities, and organizations all over the world have supported my quest to learn and to teach. From Seoul to Seattle to Lawrence to Eagle Butte to Santiago de los Caballeros, there have been kids who inspired, teachers who innovated, and families who believed. Your belief and your time and your efforts have sustained me. Every kid, family, and educator in Trenton, Pacifica, Los Angeles, Shanghai, Alexandria, Chicago, Groton, Houston County, Wethersfield, Singapore . . . I can't possibly name all of you here, but we lived this—together. Thanks.

When I express wisdom, it is because Holly Kim Price, Vicki Boyd, and the entire team at Heinemann forged a path for me to seek it. I can be a mess of a teacher most of the time. Thank you all for seeing me anyway, believing in me, and dragging this book out of me. Patty Adams, Vicki Kasabian, Edie Davis Quinn, Monica Crigler, Eric Chalek, Elizabeth Silvis, Brett Whitmarsh, Lauren Audet, Cheryl Savage, Sam Garon, Michelle Flynn, and the event people, Natalie Pavlov and the home team, all of you have taught me, through your tireless work, that we all have something to say and that it is worth every sacrifice to say it. Thanks for making this happen.

Liberia. ATL. NYC. Forever. ForeverEver.

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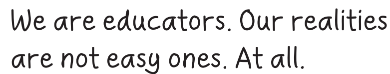


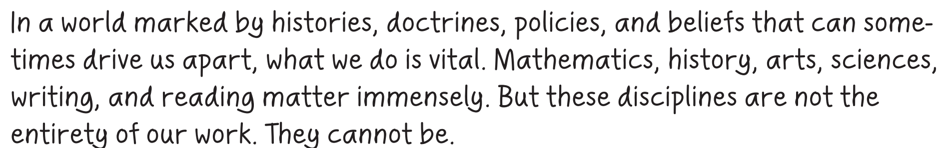
We carry the collective hope of eighteen or twenty-eight or thirty-seven students at a time.

And it is hard for some of our students to hope when there are bullies in the locker room,

when there is never anyone at home,
when there is only food at school,
when the traumas of the world weigh them down in our classrooms,
when their unique abilities or ways of knowing are not acknowledged or respected,
when we don't construct realities that include their two moms or one grandparent or adopted family,
when their gender does not match the restrooms or roles that we force them into,
when there is lead in the water,
when the police kill people that look like them, or when the lobbyists and legislators make it easy for people to buy automatic weapons and walk into classrooms.

It is hard to marshal hope when the world's capacity to care is often directly proportional to the number of digits on their parents' W-2.

But we do it. We do more than hope. We make miracles six periods a day.



Education is about two things—teaching young people to create opportunity for themselves *and* teaching them to do that work responsibly—with respect to our environment and to the myriad communities of people that share our planet.

Anything that abridges opportunity or compromises our responsibilities to one another is our enemy. As such, if we are not doing equity, then we are not doing education.

This is immense work, but this work of ensuring equity and access is doable. We inherited this calling from our predecessors.

And we move forward armed with tools and with strategies. This book is full of them.

Our journey starts with an understanding that no great good can be done for a people if we do not listen to them first. Powerful teaching is rooted in powerful listening.

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Introduction

We All Want Better

THERE WERE A FEW THINGS ABOUT THE UNITED STATES OF America that assaulted my senses almost as soon as I stepped off the plane for the first time—the sun did not shine with the equatorial intensity that I was used to, the sound of English being spoken without the usual Liberian musicality required my ears to do more work, and my parents seemed to become fiercer versions of themselves. Instantly. They trusted nothing, behaving as if everything in this new land could kill me.

The usual reminder "I love you, son," came bundled with stern warnings like "Do not talk to strangers!" and "Stay close to the apartment!" and "Hold my hand!" Though I was too young to understand why, I was able to surmise that to my tough West African parents, all of these things were some version of love.

Love can be strange.

Back then, everything was. I was an elementary school student from Liberia, and I did not understand a lot of what was going on around me. I had so much to learn then. I still do now.

I grew up in a home that my parents fortified—with light, laughter, and love—against the terrifyingly unknown aspects of our new country that were gathering right outside of the apartment door. My parents knew little about hamburgers, comic books, video games, and hip-hop. Much to their confusion, these were the things that became my new nationality.

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In our home, the typical preadolescent battles that should have been waged over remembering one's chores were instead fought over the fact that for a time, I abandoned jollof rice for Happy Meals, Anansi for Spider-Man, and highlife for hip-hop.

My parents would not have it.

Each day they would see to it that I ate proper Liberian meals, they would tell me stories until my sides hurt from laughter, and my mother's hi-fi cassette tapes poured Liberian soul into every room of the house.

My mother and father reminded me constantly that I would always be Liberian—that I would always be me. "Stop trying so hard to be them, Cornelius. They are great in their own way. You are great in yours."

As an educator in a system that feels like it can sometimes value compliance over creativity, I remember those words often. We are asked to do a lot in this work. This does not bother me. We are here to do great things.

What concerns me is that given the profound challenges that we face in the classroom, we are most frequently asked to try really hard to be "them."

We are asked to be them when our responses to children are dictated by what the curriculum *allows* as opposed to what kids need. We are asked to be them any time we are asked to adopt a classroom stance that does not honor multiple ways of being, knowing, and communicating. We are asked to be them when we are told to work in ways that are blind to the contexts of family, community, culture, power, and oppression.

As educators, we know that we find much of our power in collaborative work. When our ways of seeing children, planning for them, facilitating opportunities, and reflecting on those experiences are informed by what we learn from each other, all kids benefit.

Being our brilliant, passionate, and creatively flawed selves is hard. We invent things, try them, and make mistakes. Our successes are not overnight, and the work required to get to them can feel imperfect. When we are not being assaulted by our lack of sleep, we are besieged by the guilt, fear, and uncertainty that are often associated with not always having the answer. In loving response to this, there are movements in our profession that seek an alluring kind of uniformity—one that promises to make this work easier by rooting it in a fidelity to mandate that threatens to homogenize us into a collective "them."

Love can be strange.

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But, we don't have to be that. We don't have to be them. You, friend, are already great in your own way, and I think that we can be great together.

No matter what drew us to teaching or how we got here, we all have a few things in common.

To start, we all want better.

The paths that we have chosen to actualize *better* are as varied as our expertise, our backgrounds, our communities, and our schools. Still, we, as a profession, are united in the reality that we want better experiences for children and young adults.

We want them to have access to art, music, and movement. We want them to know more science and math and history. We have done everything in our power to create opportunities for them to read well, think critically, and write expressively. I know this.

I also know the world that I see outside my window.

And I'm not OK with it. At all.

I know that the things that we want for children cannot happen optimally if kids attend schools that are underequipped to serve them or their communities.

Growing up, I knew that my ability to make and sustain a life for myself was intimately connected to my teachers' ability to authentically see me—a relative outsider—and to effectively teach me. Many of them excelled at this, but as my friends and I matured, it became clear that schools, no matter what they profess, simply function to perpetuate the inequities already present in the communities that house them.

Some communities have been crippled by poverty or robbed of access to opportunity by de facto segregation and by policy. Others have been rendered silent by selective empathy, complacency, or apathy.

Hard work, creativity, and honesty were the norm in my neighborhood. They are in most places. But the rewards for those things—opportunity, access, social mobility—were often reserved for the rich kids on the other side of our town.

It is probably like this in your town.

I want better. This is why I came to education. I wanted to teach kids how to write well. Beyond that, I wanted to teach them how to spin those words into opportunity, into capital, and into freedom.

I taught for years—first in the Bronx, New York, and then in Brooklyn. During that time, I became obsessed with a question: What does it mean

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to be appropriately equipped to serve a community and its most precious resource—its children?

That question and the journey that I've been on since asking it drive this book.

My job has changed over the years, but my pursuit remains the same. I am still learning what it means to be appropriately equipped with not just the resources but the content knowledge, the teaching methods, the interpersonal skills, the social consciousness, and the kind of audacious attitude required to serve children powerfully.

Currently, I am a staff developer. I work with teachers in classrooms all over the world.

I have worked with thousands of students and hundreds of teachers across over thirty-five school districts representing countries on five continents, and I know one thing for sure: there is no single answer.

I'm encountering all kinds of things on my journey. I know that our work is curricular. Always. But it is also interpersonal and political. I cannot teach kids to write—or to do math, or art, or history, or coding—with content alone. Education should function to change outcomes for whole communities. And if I'm serious about community building, I've got to invest regularly and wholly in the people, the relationships, and the mechanisms that form the community. It takes time and serious imagination to learn to do that.

In this book we get to do that. Together.

I always thought that when I sat to write the intro to my own book, somehow this would mean that I had made it.

Though I've come a long way from sneaking ninety-nine-cent cheeseburgers into my parents' house, I don't have the sense of relief that I thought I would have at this point in my career.

Stepping off the plane over thirty years ago, I was just learning to see people, things, and experiences that were different from me. Eighteen years ago, I was just learning how to really see an entire classroom. I was teaching myself to see each child in it, to see each kid's talents and personal aspirations, and to see the hopes handed to the students by their communities. This was beautiful work made complicated when I was also forced to regard and participate in the scholastic, institutional, and social mechanisms that kill opportunity for so many students.

My career has been defined by my attempt to bridge the enormous gulf between the promises of education and the actual lived experiences

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of so many of my students. We, as a profession, have been forced to surf the tension between what should be and what is.

Now, I don't see just my classroom. Because of my work with children and teachers, I get to see into classrooms across town and over oceans. Because I have actually shared classrooms, lesson plans, failures, and triumphs with many of your fellow teachers, I know what you have come to know, and I know that you feel this tension too.

I am still ill at ease with the world. My senses are still under assault from some of the things that we experience.

This is a strange feeling that imposes a particularly uneasy consciousness. Most days I move through the world wearing a complicated smile. I love my students, my colleagues, and my work. But I don't love the reality that for all we know about thinking and learning, we have not turned our knowing into universally equitable access to opportunity for all of the students that we serve.

I am not OK with a world where only some people—the ones who were born on the right side of town or the ones who happened to make the right friends—get a shot at success.

You aren't either.

As teachers, we cannot guarantee outcomes—that all kids will start businesses, lead their families, and contribute in their communities—but we can guarantee access. We can ensure that everyone gets a shot.

Consider this a manual for how to begin that brilliantly messy work. We got this.

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PART 1

This Ain't Everybody's Hero Story—It's Yours

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My first understanding of a superhero's origin came from a hand-me-down Spider-Man book that my cousin let me borrow. He handed it to me in Sunday school. The cover was so inviting that I excused myself to the bathroom—eschewing a lesson about Paul in Damascus to hide out beside the urinals and read about Peter in Queens.

Sister Jones, my Sunday school teacher, was one of the church mothers. She wore only white and smelled like peppermint. She gave out the best candies after church and birthday cards with crisp five-dollar bills annually, but none of this obscured the terrifying fact that she was quick, she missed nothing, and she was not afraid to punish another person's child.

So with my book hidden in my ill-fitting suit jacket, I slinked toward the bathroom, knowing that I would not have much time to live in Peter Parker's New York. Once there, I read quickly, voraciously. I did not savor the words and images. Time and fear of Sister Jones would not allow this. Even so, I knew that this book was powerful. I could not wait to talk to my cousin.

When I got to him, I recounted the hero's story in the kind of reverent detail that Sister Jones reserved for hymns and testimony.

"He was bitten by a spider and became very strong," I started, exhaling the words as forcefully as I had taken them in moments before. "Then something bad happened, and he did not use his powers to stop it," I continued. "He felt guilty and resolved to always help people. Then he did. And no one could stop him." I paused.

"He knows . . . that with great power comes great responsibility." I exhaled a final awestruck, "Wow!" That mantra left my heart racing. In many ways, it still does.

I have come to learn that every generation has its hero story, and each story has its accompanying mantra. The contexts of those stories are different, but be they real or fictitious, when we tell the stories of our heroes, they all have the same arc.

Our heroes are created from a simple template. Even when they do not fit cleanly, our retellings and mythologies make them fit.

They are usually incredibly powerful and chosen in a fatefully divine moment. They confront the things that are clearly bad—no gray areas—and they

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often do this work alone. They suffer few setbacks, but when they do, they are didactic ones. Their good intentions and their sacrifice downplay or mute any collateral damage.

And they all end with a similarly themed mantra.

Great power. Great responsibility.

Do your best. Never quit. Treat people fairly. Stand for what's right. Truth. Justice. National pride.

"He knows . . . that with great power, comes great responsibility."

All of these can be beautiful statements of ideal, but the thing about hero stories and mantras is that we, as a society, believe them. Wholeheartedly and to a fault.

When one considers Western civilization, the hero ideal—more than religion and capitalism—is our national and economic ideology. To varying degrees we subscribe to the myths that there are people who are somehow better than us, who possess an uncannily elevated ability to focus, to work, to think, and to act, and that these people's extraordinary abilities mean that they are more worthy of moral authority and economic prosperity.

When we talk about ourselves, these are the stories that we tell. This is our mythology and our popularized history.

This is Gilgamesh, Ulysses, and Zeus. This is George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Ragged Dick. These are, of course, the fictions we consume. This is Batman, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man. Even when we seek to make that narrative more inclusive, we end up telling the same story.

One person. Incredible will. Divine ability. On a mission to save us all.

This is Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., and César Chávez.

These are the athletes we cheer for. These are the leaders that we want to elect. These are the people who we hope will teach our children. We want them all to have hero-like qualities.

The problem with this narrative is not those people. They are brilliant. The problem with this narrative is that it erases the complicated calculus of becoming and being a hero, a leader, a change agent, a teacher. This narrative does not allow heroes to be imperfect or to be nuanced. It does not allow them to grow tired, to fail, to learn publicly, or to grieve. As such, it is exclusive.

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Any narrative that mutes or denies imperfection silences and refuses our essential humanity.

The subtext of all of this says, "You can't quite be a hero, because you are tired, and heroes don't get tired, and because you are confused or angry or unready or broken." We have been taught that none of these things is heroic. And to some extent, we have believed this—both text and subtext.

Stories are a powerful blueprint for what is possible. The histories that we choose to tell regulate our imagination for the futures that we aspire to build. That these stories often get told in a way where Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Bayard Rustin, and Dolores Huerta don't exist as easily as their contemporaries limits how we understand, plan for, and work toward change.

We can learn lots from hero stories, but sometimes they leave out the concrete realities of change.

Change is participatory. There is no program you can buy or person you can pay to make things better for you.

Though **change** is personal, this kind of **work** requires a team of people who will not (and should not) always agree with you. Often, you'll have to deal, in some public way, with your own flaws.

Change is not a one-size-fits-all thing. Nor is there a single solution or panacea for real progress. The **work** that is required feels like trial and error (and error and error) most of the time.

Working toward **change** almost always means that we must abandon ways of doing things and thinking things that are not working. One cannot change outcomes for a student, a classroom, a school, or a district without changing one's own behavior and thinking. In this, sometimes we fail or undermine our own **work**. We can forgive ourselves for this and continue moving forward.

This **work** is not instant. There is no quick path to success. Things won't always go well the first (or second or ninth) time. We are allowed to fail, reflect, improve, and **try again**. This is the only way.

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The "teacher as superhero" story can be similarly misleading.

We cannot begin to fully understand this story without a quick examination of why people would construct such a narrative in the first place. To consider Batman as a hero, one must acknowledge Gotham City, its inhabitants, and their storied mythology. He does not exist without context.

"Any narrative that mutes or denies imperfection silences and refuses our essential humanity."

To consider teachers as heroes, one must acknowledge schools, communities, students, and the uneasy history that binds them. We do not exist without context either.

The inhabitants of Gotham live in fear of evident crime from a few public crime lords. In his universe, this is how things are for Batman—this is his status quo. Batman knows this. His crusade is not just against the crime lords. His work is fundamentally disruptive because it aims to change the status quo. The only people who oppose him are those who benefit in some way from the way things are.

Schools are economic and political constructs. This is how they are. The leaders in China's Song Dynasty saw them this way and they articulated it clearly. They erected schools as a pathway to civil service jobs. As such, school was at the center of economic stability to the governed and civic stability to those who governed. This, of course, was not without its problems. In theory, all males were eligible, but the cost of an education—even in the year 960—was great, so only the sons of well-off parents could afford to succeed. This meant that only the sons of well-off parents got good jobs. For centuries, few challenged this.

"We are allowed to fail, reflect, improve, and try again."

In the 1770s Thomas Jefferson grappled with this issue. In an ideal sense, he saw schools as a political safeguard from the potential tyranny of a king. In a democracy, white men would vote for those who would govern. But to vote, he contemplated, one needed to understand the issues of the day, and he believed schools could serve in this capacity.

Since Jefferson, educators have sought to raise the quality of education and to broaden access to it. The work of teachers has not been just to teach. For generations, educators have labored to ensure that access to schools (and to the opportunities that schools guarantee) extended equally not just to men or

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to the wealthy but to all learners. This work is economic, it is political, and it is disruptive; it seeks to change the status quo by making room at the table for all of us.

There are those who oppose this kind of work, and they do so partly because, whether they know it or not, they benefit in some way from the way things are.

So why the teacher-as-hero mythology?

Because if educators are working toward equity, one way to silence them is to deify them.

In both its fact and its many fictions, the story of the superhero teacher creates a set of problematic expectations for our profession, the people engaged in it, and those that we labor to serve.

It suggests that one can work alone, that constant sacrifice is the expected method for doing this work well, or that our work is the result of some kind of inherent or mystical goodness and not years of careful practice and study. It allows one to discredit work that is in progress or those who do this work in nontraditional ways, because heroes can look only like Hilary Swank, Michelle Pfeiffer, Edward James Olmos, Sidney Poitier, or Glenn Ford.

One way to take your voice back is to expand the narrative.

The thing that they rarely show you in the superhero books and movies is the practice montage—the time that people spend getting good. Even in the biographies we read, little attention is given to the time that our real-life heroes spend missing their families, the time they spend second-guessing themselves, disagreeing with their allies, or recovering from the stresses of the job.

I'm a writing teacher. Many of us are. We can help the profession to craft a better hero narrative. In doing so, we can craft better heroes . . . not just for the students that we hope to teach but for the world that we hope to build.

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