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THE FIRST FIVE

A LOVE LETTER TO TEACHERS

PATRICK HARRIS II

FOREWORD BY **CHEZARE A. WARREN**

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Portsmouth, NH

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**TO MY YOUNGER SELF,
WAY AHEAD OF HIS TIME,
TOO IN THE RACE TO STOP FOR THE LESSONS.
AND FOR ALL THOSE WHO ANSWER
THE CALL TO TEACH.**



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FOREWORD

LOVE IS AN ACTION WORD. AN INTENTION. A COMMITMENT. TO LOVE IS TO HONOR BOTH

the good and the bad, the beautiful and the unsightly. Loving necessitates some suffering, but the object of deep affection is deserving and worthy of the best we have to offer no matter how arduous the love journey. And it is a journey. Giving, pouring, and sacrificing of oneself in service to their own or someone else's healing and well-being constitutes the highest form of impenitent benevolence. Love rewards us with countless life lessons if we allow it to, even when those lessons invite regret and lament.

What you hold in your hand (or are viewing on your screen) is the product of Patrick Harris' boundless love. His love of self despite coming of age in an anti-Black, racist, homophobic world. His love of young people and the twinkle of their inherent brilliance. His love for the embattled and woefully undervalued profession of teaching. And, most pointedly, his love for teachers. Yes! Those individuals brave enough to occupy the front lines of education, who do their jobs with deftness despite the deafening noise of an uninformed public discourse about teaching in the digital age. From the first story Patrick tells, to the questions of reflection he poses to the community of voices included in this epic love letter, it is clear that he loves teachers and teaching.

And so, in the spirit of *The First Five*, I will narrate a small part of my own love journey to teaching and becoming a teacher. This book involuntarily thrust me back in time to the 1980s—to my childhood in Chicago about four hours from Detroit where Patrick grew up. Marge was our next-door neighbor and babysitter. I can remember sitting in her basement boisterously gathering the two-, three-, and four-year-olds to teach them the ABCs, exuberantly sharing what I learned just days before. Even from such a young age, I loved the project of knowledge exchange. In fifth grade, I'd create handwritten worksheets for other kids to complete based on something we'd studied the week before. In middle school and high school, I volunteered for any role that positioned me to prepare my classmates to learn a specific skill or complete a task.

I graduated from my state's flagship institution of higher education with a degree in elementary education in a program identical to the one Patrick completed, poised to change the world teaching Black kids back home on Chicago's west and south sides. But also, like Patrick, I became disheartened by the many obstacles to doing the one thing that I've always loved to do. The lack of expansive representations of blackness and Black people in the curriculum. The incessant focus on raising test scores no matter how much drill and (s)kill. The insistence that I place discipline in my classroom above student care, joy, and agency. It was all so unsettling. I, like Patrick, began changing schools to find the perfect set of working conditions. Five schools in five years. There were so many questions brewing in my mind about if I could retire from a career as a K-12 educator. I wondered what it would take to change teaching for the better. I pondered what role I might play to effect real change for kids, families, and colleagues.

To answer many of the questions bumping up against long-held beliefs about teaching in my head, I went to graduate school. Patrick went to Twitter. Two of us on parallel journeys across time and space with a few twists and turns that led our paths to intersect at Michigan State University (MSU). Here I am, a first-year assistant professor of teacher education, encountering a young Black man from "the city" like me doing the same exact thing I was doing a decade before him. I did not know, however, that the undergraduate student speaker at my first MSU commencement would go on to craft such an extraordinary set of professional experiences—pivotal moments, incidences, and interactions that would lead to publication of this must-read extended playlist of chapters melodically narrating Patrick's first five years in our beloved profession.

I could not stop smiling as I read *The First Five*, and you won't either. Patrick uses every page of this book to articulate wisdoms that I have long struggled to comprehend, even with my decade of expertise as an education researcher. Doing and being are not in opposition. In other words, doing the work of teaching and being a teacher, while symbiotic, are indeed mutually exclusive exercises. I loved teaching, but I grew to lament being a teacher. My discontent with being a teacher was in many ways because I was too often distracted from remembering my why. I did not have enough reminders of the love of teaching that brought me to the profession in the first place. It is this love that indeed sustains me in my present role as a university faculty member.

The First Five is an unabashed offering of solidarity to teachers, and a reminder to love themselves enough to tell the truth about what it takes to do this vital work with youth and young people. This book names the complexities of the job with clarity and candor. Patrick uses his experience as a witty case study through which to discern how we might build an education ecosystem that foremost appreciates the difficulty of teaching. This book is both a retrospective and a road map. Patrick is still in the classroom. In a voice all his own, Patrick also uses *The First Five* to emphasize the pride in being a teacher. This book is the intervention I needed as a young teacher to help me know I was not alone. I needed to be reminded that what I was feeling was valid, and that this journey would take me to heights (and depths) unknown if I just remembered to lean into the love above and against everything else.

The First Five is, in Patrick's words, a "love letter to teachers." It evokes all the emotions and titillates the senses. You have a front row seat to Patrick's journey of love, which also means you get the privilege of witnessing both his grief and his joy. Behold his revelation and his confusion as he navigates six schools in five years. The beautiful images and storytelling style are icing on the cake, making for a lavish adventure into Patrick's inner self. There are no dull moments. I hope Patrick's journey of love points you toward the healing and wholeness we all deserve—teacher or not. This his love letter. A gift to pass along for many years to come, from him to all of us.

— Chezare A. Warren, Vanderbilt University



INTRODUCTION

THE WEIGHT



Patrick, Not Pat :)
@PresidentPat



Thursday I'll officially be an Education major again and for the last time. No more changing!



Oct 23, 2011

I HUGGED MY MOM IN THE CAR AND RAN INTO THE BACK ENTRANCE OF MICHIGAN STATE

University's Breslin Center. This was one of the few times I had ever stepped foot inside the basketball arena. I switched between an energetic sprint and a slow skip, moving my way through the crowd. One hand holding my green cap and the other bunching my gown to keep me from tripping and falling but still being careful not to mess up my nana's carefully ironed crease.

The march from the curtain to the stage was euphoric. It was an out-of-body experience. I didn't hear the music or the crowd roaring. All I could feel were the hairs raising on my arm and the butterflies gathering. My four years flashed before me with each step toward the stage.

I was chosen to give one of two "senior responses" during my college commencement. It was the ultimate thank-you to my family for their unwavering support over the last four years. Being the first to do anything comes with a lot of pressure. And while your family wants to help, they may struggle to find the words or offer advice because

"AT ORIENTATION, MY **MIND WAS CONSUMED BY THE ADVICE** I WAS GIVEN AND THE ARTICLES I HAD READ THAT SAID **TEACHING WAS NOT THE PROFESSION TO ENTER. THEY TOLD ME TO DREAM BIGGER.** BUT AS I MANEUVERED THROUGH MY FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE, I HAD MANY **OPPORTUNITIES** KNOCKING ON MY DOOR AND EACH AND **EVERY ONE OF THEM** LEAD ME TO WORKING BACK WITH KIDS. AND SO FROM THIS, I HAVE LEARNED THAT **WHEN YOU HAVE A CALLING IN LIFE. PICK UP."**

—COMMENCEMENT SPEECH 2015

it's a foreign experience. Despite not having gone to college themselves, my support system still found ways to help me navigate this new world. This was our moment, our time.

I was a Black man speaking in front of the College of Education. The demographic of the graduating class studying education closely reflected the profession's demographic. I was one of a handful of Black students in the college and the only Black male educator in my program.

I'm not sure what brought on the tears first. It might have been being able to laser focus on my mom in the crowd, seeing her wipe her tears. Or it may have been seeing my nana alongside my now 102-year-old great-grandmother and recognizing the magnitude of this moment for our family. It might have been my siblings, some whom have never met one another, blending together. My dad and my grandfather's proud gaze. It might have been hearing the piercing *alrights* and elongated *yessss* from familiar Black voices in the audience. The tears came running without warning at the podium. And with each step I took back to my seat, I was reassured that I was exactly where I needed to be.

When I walked off that stage, I would prepare to start my teaching career carrying an immense amount

of weight. I was feeling the heaviness of educational inequity for people who looked like me. Considering Black men are just less than 2 percent of the teaching force, the unicorns of the profession, I knew both the privilege and the pressure. It would be both an honor and a responsibility to answer the call. I was carrying Michael Brown's murder and the protests that followed. There was pressure building; the pressure of my queerness inside of me just waiting to be released. The pressure of perfectionism, not wanting to let down my family or my future students or myself. Knowing when I graduated college, I would

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begin living my life out and proud. Still considering that Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reports that one-third LGBTQIA+ educators feel their jobs would be at risk if they were out to their administrators and one-half of LGBTQ+ educators feel their careers would be at risk if they were out to their students. More alarming, only 12 percent of LGBTQIA+ youth see school as an affirming space. All students, both Black and Queer, deserve to have committed classroom teachers who are reflective of their own identities and are teaching affirming curriculums. I knew it would not be easy carrying all of this. But stepping off the commencement stage, I had the utmost optimism in what could be accomplished. With the weight and the pressure I persisted.

Talking to my nana on the phone is a time I both look forward to and sometimes avoid. It's a family rule that you never go more than 72 hours without returning a phone call or she would track your location and show up in person. "Which one do you want?" she often said. I could not help but laugh not because it was funny but because I knew it was true.

The seventy-two-hour rule changed when I moved from Michigan to DC. Distance doesn't do anything but make grandmas worry twice as much. We went from talking once every three days to talking every morning on our way to work. She was on her way to the Ford Motor Company headquarters, while I managed DC traffic to my first teaching job.

I love my nana, Lord knows I do, but it is not always an easy conversation. She, like most Black grandmas, just have a way of extracting the truth from you and then reading you for absolute filth. And all in love. Here's a simple example. When I moved back home I was adamant about moving into downtown Detroit because I wanted a "city lifestyle." She rebutted with, "You should certainly check out the apartments around the block [from my mom's house] before you rush into making a decision."

Yeah, right. There were a lot of things I wanted to do and living close to home was not one of them. After only a few searches, I signed a lease for an apartment in the thick of the action. I enjoyed hearing the hustle, being in walking distance of the Detroit River, being close to my friends, seeing the skyline at night, having access to Whole Foods since I was newly vegan. Only two weeks into my stay did I realize that I really do value quiet. The vroom of the motorcyclists and the let-out from the outdoor amphitheatre around the corner was just too much.

***Boy. What did I tell you?
You're going to start listening to me one day.
Take your time.***

My nana doesn't sugarcoat much. I should've taken my time. I should've looked at a variety of places. Her "I told you so" was coating every minute of that call. It was in that tough moment that I started to think about all of our daily phone calls, my mistakes, and what lessons I'd learned throughout my life. The throughline has always been slow and deep reflection should be my best friend.

Reflection is the most critical practice of an effective teacher. It's making meaning of your past in order to make change for the future. Too often in education, we are forced to make decisions without having enough time to truly reflect. We're juggling mandated curriculum, teacher evaluations, standardized tests, harmful disciplinary practices, pandemics. I repeat . . . pandemics . . . and all the complications that come with it—lack of access to Wi-Fi, limited access to devices, families dealing with financial and health crises, the huge learning curve of virtual learning and teaching. It can feel overwhelming to make reflection a part of your life as an educator but it's important to do so. Why?

Because we have been fighting an uphill battle, even before this pandemic.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 8 percent of teachers leave the profession yearly and another 8 percent move to other schools, bringing the total annual turnover rate to 16 percent. More alarming is the fact that turnover rates are 50 percent higher for teachers in Title I schools and 70 percent higher for teachers in schools serving the largest concentrations of students of color (Learning Policy Institute 2017a, 2017b). Moreover, 80 percent of teachers are white and 77 percent of them are female. People of color make up about 20 percent of teachers and a mere 2 percent are Black men. And we know, specifically, that Black teachers make a difference. A Johns Hopkins



Patrick, Not Pat :)
@PresidentPat



[VULNERABLE THREAD]



This is my 6th year of teaching and I'll be teaching in my 6th school. Yeah, you read that correctly. Over the past several years, during the "first five" years of teaching I have really struggled to find a school community to call home.

I know this is not normal. It's not something they tell you to prepare for in undergrad. It's not ideal. Each year I stepped foot in a school building, I had every intent on staying for the long run because I planned to be a "career teacher." No one could tell me different.

Aug 13, 2020

INTRODUCTION

economist found that “having at least one black teacher in third through fifth grades reduced a black student’s probability of dropping out of school by 29 percent. For Black boys who live in low-income neighborhoods, the results are even greater—their chance of dropping out fell 39 percent” (John Hopkins University 2018). Without a doubt our impact is significant.

So, like my nana told me, “Take your time.”

I started writing this book when everything in my life was normal. I was twenty-five years old living in Washington, DC, in an affordable apartment. I was finally out and proud. I was newly inducted into our country’s first and greatest Black intercollegiate Greek fraternity. I was documenting my school year, week by week, on my *Common Sense* podcast, racking up thousands of listens and creating traction on my personal social media accounts. And all of this was intersected with working at my dream school, teaching dream content, working with Black boys. After working in three schools, in three years, it felt good to settle. To be normal. Meeting my incredible editor to craft a book about the experiences, latest research, and best practices for educating Black boys in our education system seemed like an exciting next step. You couldn’t tell me nothing. Until I was fired in the middle of the year.

It’s funny how these things happen. Everything that I knew to be true became murky. My confidence had depleted and the pain was mickle. Who was I? Did I belong in this profession? How do I maintain my credibility online? I knew nothing else but to vamoose. I packed up all of my bags and went overseas to start over in Qatar, where foreign was my new normal. Deep in depression, anxiety, and homesickness, I had nothing but time and space. Quiet and reflection. Normal can’t exist without *no*. And so it was here that I had to get clear about what I truly wanted, what I really believed in, and where I was going. My amazing editor Holly told me to just embrace the journey.

I know I don’t have to convince you that there is a lot going on in the world. I know I don’t have to know you personally to know that you have a story of your own. I do not have to convince you of the dangers of our society pushing the world to do business as usual in the most uncertain times. Global conflict, sickness, systemic oppression prove how interconnected we are every day. Yet our society’s answer to these issues is and has always been: individualism and normalcy. It is normal to attend countless education conferences, trainings, and online chats, and they all are hyper-focused on telling teachers what to do and ensuring that they know how to do it quickly. I too wanted the grab-and-go,

tell me what I need to know, because the pressure was always on. Test scores have to increase yesterday. Pop-up observations could happen at any minute now. We are in the midst of a pandemic and the world is looking to teachers to clean up a mess we didn't spill.

I want this book to help you to release that pressure. Creating change in our education system and our greater society is a long-term game and I need you here: fired up, ready to go, and whole. This book will not tell you what to do. Instead, this book will ask you to reflect on what you have experienced. This book will just ask you to dream big about what you want to be true for yourself, personally and professionally, our students, and our education system today and tomorrow. I wrote this book with the belief that teachers are human beings doing human work every day. Thus, if we want to be the best at our jobs, we need to know more than just what to do. I strongly believe that teachers must begin sharing our stories, not just our strategies.

The First Five is a collection of short stories, timeless lessons, and big questions from my first five years as a classroom teacher. This book is a memoir but with a call to action. When this book is released, I will be in my seventh year of teaching in my sixth school. I have seen education through a plethora of schools: traditional public, traditional charter, tuition-based private, tuition-free private, international, homogenous and diverse, wealthiest and beneath the poverty line. I know what it means to move away from home and teach in another state; to board a plane and teach overseas; to be fired in the middle of the school year; to heavily consider changing careers; to win national education awards and be featured in national publications; to see students start the year as nonreaders and leave above grade level; to watch students grapple with social issues and develop action plans; to push against the system and fail; to be fired up and tired. I know from these experiences that we all have more in common than we do differences across disciplines and contexts. You better believe with all of this, in just seven years, I have a story to tell.

My experience teaching is anything but normal. So it is only right that this book takes a different approach. Each chapter begins with a story from one of my years of teaching. I want to immerse you in my world. For some of you these stories may be preachin' to the choir. Feel free to write *amen* in the margins. Some of these stories may be completely

**REFLECTION
IS THE MOST
CRITICAL PRACTICE
OF AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER.
IT'S MAKING MEANING
OF YOUR PAST
IN ORDER TO MAKE
CHANGE FOR THE
FUTURE.**

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different than your teaching experience. This is *my* truth. The book is not chronological, but it includes stories across my first five years. And I will warn you now, within my truth is a range of emotions. Embrace the journey. I won't leave you hanging.

Within each chapter, you will also find an array of visuals. I am a teacher that still loves finding pictures in adult books. These visuals are meant to be used as paired texts. Some pictures are directly from my home photo album. There are some photos that are historical, literal, and abstract, helping me to help you understand the lesson each chapter illustrates. You may also find bits of poetry and quotes from a range of educators both traditional and nontraditional: teachers, philosophers, Ballroom House parents, students, authors, and more.

I like to label myself as a fantast. This means I am a dreamer. Each story leads to a lesson. These lessons work together to make me the educator I am today. Don't view them as isolated. Further, I often find myself asking big questions I don't have the answers to. Each chapter's lesson leads to a Big Question at the end. It is my hope that these questions will help spark long conversations with your squad. I hope that it will push you to affirm or change your own thinking and develop your own solutions. Big questions are the match that lights the spark. I have also learned that I must be more specific. In the spirit of my nana, I have included slow and deep reflection exercises that you can engage in individually, with a small group or PLC, or with a large group. These reflection exercises may require varying levels of vulnerability.

While the book is centered in my experiences, I know from tweeting and meeting educators from across the world that we all have stories. At the end of each chapter, you will find reflections from a diverse group of educators. These interviews were transcribed from Zoom interviews I conducted. There are teachers in their first five years, veteran teachers, international educators, former teachers, and administrators. We all have something to share.

I am an author who is still a current classroom teacher. Please know that I wrote this book to teachers and educators from a strength-based perspective. It means that I see you. I acknowledge the hours, the work, the blood, sweat, and tears you put into this profession. I see you. I acknowledge the trainings you have attended, the degrees you hold, and the expertise you possess. I see you. I acknowledge the amount of money you've spent and frustration you feel when you attempt to catapult change in our system. I see

you. I acknowledge how overworked and underpaid you are in a system that has more than enough to provide you stability. I see you. I wrote this book as an educator for educators. I will never speak to you from a deficit.

It is also important to clarify that this book is very teacher centered. I believe that when teachers are seen as human beings, then students too will be benefiting academically, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. So yes, teachers, this book is for you. However, my biggest fear in writing this book is that those reading this book will believe that I am too teacher centered when this work is about students. I talked with my close friend and fellow author Lorena Germán, and she told me, “Teacher centered is your approach to writing but not your approach to practice.” I love it when my friends get me. This book is for you, and this work cannot move without you, but we know we do it for the kids. You must know how important you are to this work. I recognize your humanity. I want to extend grace. I want to build community with you, teacher to teacher. And it is my hope that the work we do together will leave you empowered and ensure that you stay in the classroom for a few more years. And in turn you will empower your students and they will recognize the power of seeing the humanity within themselves. You are a model.

And so I guess this is the part where the introduction ends and the book begins. I’m a little nervous. Can you take a deep breath with me?

Get still.

Recognize your breath.

Take a slow inhale through your nose.

Recognize how your chest puffs up.

And wait.

Then, slowly exhale through your mouth.

Maybe you recognize the sounds around you.

Or maybe you look around and notice something new.

I am just one piece of a larger picture. But still, like you, my story matters. I have made mistakes. I have not done everything right. But through deep and meaningful reflection I continue to learn. And I am still here. I am so looking forward to your reflections, your critiques and affirmations. We are in this together, for the long haul. Here’s to the next five years.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AND WHAT ABOUT ME?



Patrick, Not Pat :)
@PresidentPat



Sometimes, as a teacher who teaches the “hard stuff,” I worry about my classroom feeling too heavy too often. To combat that feeling, I tell myself and sometimes my students if we’re tired of reading + learning about it, imagine living it daily. The content is necessary.



Jan 6, 2021

JANUARY 6, 2021

Thousands of angry pro-Trump supporters from across the country gathered for a rally in our nation’s capital. They were enraged by the announcement that Donald J. Trump would only serve one term after losing to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election. Through conservative algorithms used by journalists, social media influencers, and elected officials, lies circulating Trump’s false claim that the election was stolen were fed to his supporters, leaving them full of rage.

The rage pushed thousands of supporters, including teachers and educators, over the edge and into the streets of the nation’s capital. They answered Trump’s call to protest the election results and interrupt the certification of Joe Biden as our forty-sixth president and Kamala Harris as our first Black and female vice president. While they were in the streets, I was on my couch in the midst of remote learning. This was our school’s flex

day, which meant I had more downtime than usual to catch up on work and watch the news. In the beginning, I felt desensitized to the anger. We had been through four years of dangerous words and rallies. I had no shock to give. Unlike what I learned in schools, the racist rhetoric being spewed at this rally did not come from people wearing white sheets or masks. They were ordinary Americans. Loud and proud and angry. Confederate flags would fly back and forth. The American flag would be stomped and burned. I could see the red rising. When Donald Trump empowered his base with chants and cheers and a call to action: march to the United States Capitol to “fight back.” I chuckled in disbelief. He has said something crazy again.

Before I had a moment to adjust, the mob began stampeding down the street without organization or civility—just wrath. Within minutes and without major opposition, they stormed the United States of America’s Capitol. They clobbered windows and slithered through the front door of America’s symbol of democracy.

It was a horror movie. The mob infiltrated the floors of the Senate and the House of Representatives with ease. They rushed and ransacked the private offices of our elected officials, vandalizing everything in sight. Members were hiding behind locked doors, fearing for their lives underneath wood tables. There were children present. This was no kindergarten tornado drill. This was indeed a classic terror attack: an unorganized, chaotic incident that seemed to have no actual plan but to bring fear to your living rooms. They knew, amid a pandemic, you’d be watching. A siren of terror.

Our democracy was being attacked.

What I thought was just another public, attention-seeking temper tantrum evolved into an insurrection. We were in the midst of a middle school faculty meeting when the insurrectionists breezed past the first barricade of cops. I was unable to focus on our school’s upcoming schedule. And, if I’m being 100 percent real, it was a camera-off, mute, speaker-off type of moment. My jaw was on the floor.

While people just saw this as an attack on our government and our democracy, I also saw it as an attack on my former students in Washington, DC, where I began my teaching career and taught for four years. Some of my students’ parents worked at or near the Capitol in a variety of roles. This was not just an attack on a system; it was a physical attack on people and residents.

While my colleagues in the meeting were responding to the current events with one another, I was shell-shocked. Unable to move. I was watching news commentators



Patrick, Not Pat :)
@PresidentPat



The beginning of this documentary really reminds me as an educator that every second and every decision counts for children. It could truly make all the difference. What if they didn't suspend him for those two weeks? [#TrayvonMartinStory](#)

Jul 30, 2018

refer to the armed people climbing the walls of the Capitol as protestors. They faced hardly any military opposition and were able to enter the Capitol with ease. Even in the midst of our country being attacked on a global stage, the media still gave them grace.

The insurrection was triggering. My gut was filled with grief for all of the Black people that I had watched be murdered by law enforcement in real time. My heart sank to my feet for all of the names who would not get national publicity. I ached for all of the Black people who were killed and still await their justice. For Trayvon Martin. For Mike Brown. For Sandra Bland. For George Floyd. For Freddie Gray. For

Rekia Boyd. For Breonna Taylor. And too many more.

I was filled with unspeakable rage when I recalled the treatment of those who filled the streets to tell the world that Black lives matter. When I helped to organize a die-in for Mike Brown in college, we were called expletives by those who “disagreed.” When Baltimore youth threw rocks at police officers after boiling over in response to Freddie Gray, former President Barack Obama said there was “no excuse for violence” from these “criminals and thugs.” Before protestors even had the opportunity to assemble after the killing of Freddie Gray and Breonna Taylor, mayors set citywide curfews and allowed police officers to show up in militarized gear holding automatic weapons. I saw tear gas being thrown into crowds. I saw the wounds of rubber bullets up close. I saw the kidnapping of protestors into unmarked cars live on television. The way police officers treated Black Lives Matter protestors and our collective response to grief was criminal. And yet, a large mob, at the direction of the former president of the United States, was able to break into the United States Capitol during a historic joint session. With no immediate consequence.

We know Black Lives Matter protestors would not have been allowed to break down a barrier of police to the United States Capitol, let alone break windows to climb inside or vandalize the Senate floor or make their way into the office of the Speaker of the House, breaking down doors sending staffers and their children to hide. That could not have happened. Well, I'll say that it would not have happened because it's

not something that Black Lives Matter protesters see as effective, necessary, or healthy for our country. It's not how we organize.

I was no longer desensitized. All of the grief, the anger, the hurt, the disbelief hit me at the same time. I had spent years being desensitized to the ways Black people and protesters had been treated. Our media has been saturated with anti-Black content.

This moment in our history reminded me I had seen varying levels of white supremacy before. I had been exposed to white supremacist rallies since elementary school. As a kid, I remember seeing the KKK burn crosses in cartoons and documentaries during Black History Month. I remember hearing stories of hangings from my grandparents. I have seen modern-day pro-gun and pro-white rallies across this country. But there was something different about the January 6 insurrection: I finally cried. Years and years of rage. Of frustration. Of hopelessness. I could not hold back my tears any longer. "Why am I crying?" I asked myself. It was the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic, amplifying every emotion all the time. It was fear of what would happen next. More importantly, I was finally allowing myself a chance to feel all of my humanity.

Whew. The tears were flowing. As the military showed up and insurrectionists gave in, social media put the pressure on teachers. The hot question was, how would teachers talk about what is happening at the insurrection in their classrooms the very next morning? If this was Patrick in his first year of teaching, without question, I would have been gathering resources, coming up with questions, activities to add to my lesson plan the next day. I felt this way after the Parkland shootings. After Breonna Taylor's murder and the brutal protests that followed. After the 2016 election. And the California wildfires (and the prisoners they use as free labor). If it was all over the news, then my students *had* to be thinking deeply about it or wanted to talk about it. I needed to prepare myself to talk about it straightaway. I often used current events as a way to throw scripted curriculum to the side and engage my students in learning that was more relevant. But, insurrection on the Capitol was different. Instead of wondering how I would organize the lesson for the next day, I was thinking about taking the next day off. This shift was new.



Patrick, Not Pat :)
@PresidentPat



Do I teach about this tomorrow or do I take off? That's really the question . . .

Jan 6, 2021

MOST FRUSTRATING FOR CRENSHAW HAS BEEN WATCHING THE GOP REDUCE **CRITICAL RACE THEORY** TO A CUDGEL TO ATTACK PROGRESS IN THE GUISE OF **PROTECTING DEMOCRACY.** 'IN THE SAME WAY THAT **ANTI-RACISM IS FRAMED AS RACISM, ANTI-INDOCTRINATION IS FRAMED AS INDOCTRINATION,'** CRENSHAW SAYS.
— VANITY FAIR MAGAZINE

The shift in my thinking was partially a response to the context in which I taught. I was a sixth- and seventh-grade humanities teacher who taught at a gifted, tuition-based, independent school about twenty-five minutes north of Detroit, in the city of Birmingham, the wealthiest city in the state of Michigan. My students were predominantly white, and I was in some cases some of my students' first Black or first Black male teacher. Though we had a positive classroom and school culture, I was traumatized by the horror in DC. And I was unsure, in my state of shock, if I was emotionally ready to "teach" this current event the very next day (even if it was remotely). I knew at this point I needed to rest and give myself time to process what was still unfolding.

Too often, as teachers, we are asked to put the pressure on ourselves and sacrifice our own needs for the needs of our institutions. Too often we are asked to put our well-being on the sideline to endure emotional labor. Too often we are asked to teach about traumatizing events before we have offered ourselves enough time to process and heal from them. Culturally responsive teaching and teaching for social justice are very popular but so are misconceptions about what they mean: many educators believe they mean overexposing our children to traumatizing content in the classroom, without any real regard to our or their emotional well-being. We have to release ourselves from the pressure to address traumatizing current events.

BIG QUESTION: How can teachers honor their humanity as they feel pressure to respond to current events?

On the previous page, I've included a reflection tool you can use to process a current event. It will help you to dive deep into your own work. The questions I will ask you will be personal to you. It might be best to answer these alone, unless you have someone near you that you trust to be vulnerable with. Then I will ask you what your reflections mean for your teaching.

You can brainstorm a plan of action that will be most beneficial for you and your students. The planning document works best in teams. The more adults can be on the same page, the better it is for students.

TEACHER REFLECTIONS

Deion J., Orangeburg and Greenville, South Carolina

Seventh- through tenth-grade English

Years in the classroom: 5

Some days we intend to teach but reality takes over. In the midst of a lesson, there was a lockdown. This was not on the schedule for the day. The kids and I were frantic. What's going on? We were instructed to wait until we got a knock on our door. And so we sat in our room, waiting for a knock on our door, trying not to overwhelm ourselves with such little information. *Knock knock.* A police officer came to our door and asked everyone to leave. All of our bags would be searched. We left our belongings in the classroom. In the hallway, we were all antsy, trying to put two and two together. Then the officer came out of the classroom with one of my student's book bags and said, "Whose is this?" One of my students brought a gun to school.