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TOWARD LIBERATION: LESSONS FROM A RULE BREAKER

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I begin this essay with an anecdote that I often share when I talk about why I am not afraid to break the rules. My grandmother, Dr. Shirley Jordan-Seay, is a retired oncology nurse and certified cancer registrar with decades of experience working with patients with cancer. My grandfather is a retired teacher who has dealt with colon cancer in the past. A few years ago, my grandmother suspected that the cancer had returned based on the symptoms that he presented with. While at the doctor's office, my grandmother mentioned additional tests that the doctor should have considered. The doctor asked her, "What are your credentials, again?" My grandmother only shared a synopsis of her qualifications and the appointment went on as usual. [Her assessment was correct; the cancer had returned.] When I think about this story, I am reminded that I exist and live in this world as a Black woman. Despite what I accomplish, what I know, and how I articulate my knowledge, there will always be someone who will cast doubt on me because of my identity.

When it comes down to it, my grandmother had the titles, education, and work experience to make a qualified suggestion. Even if she didn't, patients and their caregivers deserve to be listened to. But, a doctor faced with a caregiver displaying both concern and knowledge saw a Black woman. I share this story, not for the harrowing reality of being a Black woman in the United States. It's to share how I reclaimed my power in what I call "doing what I want anyway." It does not matter what I know or what I am capable of, so why focus on what people will think? Doing what I want anyway means that I can take risks, stand up against injustice, and say the things people are afraid to say out loud because judgment will exist whether I bite my tongue or use my voice. In a lot of ways, doing what I want is what emboldens me to continue partnership work beyond my time as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College.

Break The Rules

In June of 2023, I participated in "Teaching and Learning Together: The Opportunities and Challenges of Pedagogy Partnerships" at Grinnell College. Ten years after my beginnings in student-faculty pedagogical partnership work, I sat as a panelist for a discussion about identity and co-facilitation. While I prepared for the panel, I wrestled with what would be most important to tell a room full of people engaged or interested in partnership work. I started with what was obvious: I am a Black woman. I move through the world and am perceived through that lens on a daily basis. What else? I still feel a close connection to my identity as a student. The past trauma from my time as an undergraduate often resurfaces when I am constantly perceived and treated as if I am an undergraduate student by staff and faculty on the college campuses where I have worked since graduation. What does any of this have to do with pedagogical partnerships? Preparing to speak on the panel prompted me to think about the moments when I could catch my breath. The Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, in which I worked as a student consultant while an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College, was a place where me being a Black woman was an asset and being a student was expertise.

What else could I share with this audience? Break the rules. In a lot of ways, partnership work breaks the rules. Students are experts, power is shared, and expectations between faculty and students are reciprocal. People, rather than product or rigor, become the center of the ecosystem. Partnership work breaks the rules, but are partnerships enough to shift larger systems and cultural norms in an institution? Black women students in Cook-Sather and Seay (2021) noted how pedagogical partnerships allowed them to engage differently on campus, but one participant noted that the transformation she experienced did not go beyond the partnership. How can we embody the principles and practice of partnership work in other aspects of our campus lives? I ask this question from my current position as a staff member rather than my position as a student.

Unfortunately, every person who holds power (or is a key decision-maker on campus) will not engage in a pedagogical partnership. I'm also not sure that every person needs to engage in a pedagogical partnership. I am sure, though, that when you know better, you can do better. This sometimes requires us to break the rules.

When I speak about breaking the rules, I don't just mean the literal policies and procedures of a university. Surely, those are included, but rules also include the spoken and unspoken systems of power that influence the cultural climate of the campus. Breaking the rules is about defiance *and* a call to rip apart and reimagine the unjust systems of oppression that impact our day-to-day lives. Each time I talk about breaking the rules I see people play around with the thought, grow towards accepting the idea, and inevitably, someone asks, "how?" I don't have an answer to the "how" because it looks different for different people and, honestly, I don't have a "right" or foolproof answer. Rather, I can offer considerations and questions you can ask yourself if you feel compelled to join me in being a rule breaker.

Considerations for breaking the rules

- Know the rules
- Know the audience
- Know your values
- Be relentless

To break the rules, you first have to know and understand them. In my experience, the rules that we need to break are the unspoken, but widely understood, cultural norms that shape the campus environment. They often aren't written down, and the impact is felt through subtle channels (like how one might experience a microaggression). When identifying the rules, ask yourself these questions: What policies are in place (both written and unwritten), what systems are at work (white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism), and how do you know when the rule has been broken? You might also ask why the rule was created and what its use is in the present. These questions help to define the context in which the rule exists. You might also consider the consequences of following and not following the rules that are in place. Who benefits when the rule is followed and who is at a disadvantage? Who benefits when the rule is broken and who is inconvenienced? While these questions may present a binary, there are realities that exist across the spectrum of experiencing all of the rules that exist in our environments.

When you are in a space and you want to break the rules, you should consider who the audience is. My definition of an audience includes anyone impacted by and/or questioning the rule. You are your first audience and an awareness of your social identities and campus roles is essential to being an effective rule breaker. What power do you have? Where in your social identity do you have privilege? In what ways do you experience marginalization? What are the limits and freedoms within your role(s)? What are the expectations for someone in your position? Is the role you have valued and/or respected? Does your campus role come with protection? You might also begin considering how you approach conflict and your strengths and areas for growth.

Once you understand your positionality, you should consider the following: Who are my allies/co-conspirators? In the book *Unapologetic*, Carruthers (2018) simply asks, “Who are my people?” As you think about who your people are, ask yourself: Who is aligned with my values? Who is willing to put in the work? Who is willing to take risks? Who is willing to be in community? Carruthers (2018) states, “My people are those who can hold me accountable for my actions” (p. 98). For me, my students are the ones most likely to hold me accountable and they are also who I do this work for. I, too, hold my students accountable to the values they say they have and the work they say they do. Like in pedagogical partnerships, the relationships formed in this work require reciprocity.

Other questions to consider when defining your audience include: Who presents as a challenge or a roadblock? Who can be persuaded? As you think about the answers to those questions, identify what power each person has and what their capacity is for engaging in rule breaking. The audience also includes the folks you are trying to support by breaking the rules. Ask yourself: are you speaking for or with the community you hope to support by breaking this rule? If we look at breaking the rules as an extension of partnership work, then we must understand the importance of deep listening and reflection. As rule breakers, it is not our goal to speak over those we seek to support. Rather, we look to uplift and replace value for those most impacted by the injustices.

I tend to think about breaking the rules as one way for me to live in alignment with my values. Honesty, empathy, freedom, and community are some of the values that I need in order to feel balanced. If I notice that the environment I am in challenges my ability to live in my values, then it is a clue that there is a rule that needs to be broken. When thinking about your values, you might ask yourself: What are my values? How do my values show up in my daily life? Why do I value these things? Where did I learn these values? How do my values inform my worldview? For me, knowing my values wasn't enough. I also needed to understand what it feels like in my mind and my body when I am/am not aligned with my values. Sometimes, the discord between the environment and your values is as subtle as a pin prick but sometimes it has the feeling of a pesky mosquito or fly. Other times, the discord is disruptive, unsettling, and leaves you feeling ungrounded.

The last consideration that I have for breaking the rules is not something to know, instead it's something to be. I have asked you many questions to hopefully prepare you to be a rule breaker, but now I am telling (urging) you to be relentless. To break well-established rules and social norms is hard work. If you choose to take on the responsibility of breaking the rules, you might become “that person.” The person that, when it's your turn to speak in a meeting, people start to roll their eyes because they know you're going to ask the hard questions. You might become the

person who has to send the email that challenges an authority figure so that the concern is documented in writing. I started with the anecdote I shared because what allows me to be the rule breaker is that I do not care about someone's perception of me. This does not mean that I am fearless, but I am willing to take chances even if it comes with a cost. So, I am asking you: Can you be consistent? Can you handle a challenge? What is the risk and are you okay with it? Will you lose hope if it doesn't work the first time? How will you measure progress? What will motivate you to keep fighting? How will you take care of yourself? The charge to be relentless does not mean that you exhaust your capacity, because self-care is also a form of breaking the rules.

Let Love Heal Us All

I live with a general anxiety disorder. My anxiety comes with its share of imposter syndrome. So, when I sat in the airport in Philadelphia, in the conference room in Grinnell's Humanities and Social Studies Center, or over a meal at any point during my time at Grinnell, I had to wrestle with feeling like I wasn't as much of an expert as people said I was. I'm used to people thinking that I am articulate and that what I say is powerful, but I rarely believe them. Toward the end of the conference, as we were offering final reflections and takeaways, I shared with everyone a little bit of that difficulty for me. In that room, I quietly made a commitment to accept the affirmations as a genuine display of truth, care, and love.

In the communities I am a part of, we have the saying: "Give people their flowers before they're dead." In essence, don't wait until someone's funeral to celebrate them. As we wrapped up the final session, one of the student participants suggested that we use our nametags as a space to continue to share affirmations. We brought the name cards to our final dinner together so that we could write our messages out before we returned to our homes. Sometime before or after writing affirmations for my fellow participants, I remember looking around the room in awe.

A few weeks after returning to work, I wrote the following in my staff meeting notes:

Still thriving off the energy from the conference last week – like really thriving. Can't express enough how exciting it was to be around people thinking intentionally about partnerships but also seeing the value, expertise, and insights I bring into a space. Got to reconnect with folks I knew from other places and meet people who are near/far.

Thriving. Over the last twelve years of my life (maybe even the last sixteen), I felt like I operated from a place of survival. It has been five years since I started therapy, eight years since I graduated college, and twelve years since my college journey began. Through therapy, I had started to shed layers, but after my time at Grinnell, I unlocked a new level of healing. I could thrive, dream, and imagine again. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had left that conference with additional fuel in my tank. I had the fuel from the anecdote and the fuel of affirmation and community. When I got back to work the following week, I felt inspired, appreciated, valued, and prepared. Sometimes, when I feel self-doubt or a feeling of being undervalued I look back to

the affirmations written in my nametag. I also began to wonder; What would it look like to approach pedagogical partnerships from a place of resistance *and* love?

A few weeks after the conference at Grinnell College I went to see my favorite artist, Beyoncé, in the Renaissance World Tour. This was my second time seeing Beyoncé in concert, but this time it was different. Everything—including the musical arrangements, the crowd, and the Queen herself—exuded confidence, freedom, and love. I left the concert feeling wrapped in a safety net similar to the one I experienced while at Grinnell College. Could I approach my work in higher education from a place of freedom and safety?

In December of 2023, the documentary, “Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé,” premiered. In the documentary Beyoncé spoke, in between concert footage, about her experience as a Black woman who is an expert in her craft and yet still isn’t heard when she speaks.

Since the 90s, Beyoncé has been a prominent figure in music and entertainment, yet when she’s in a room she is still seen as a Black woman, just like my grandmother, and just like me. Yet, she still pushes forward to break the rules in her field and to center the Black experience in a way that feels whole. The documentary reminded me that you have to get to a place where you truly do not care so that you find a release to create. Like my grandmother and like Beyoncé, I have learned to stand up, stand strong, and be confident while pushing the boundaries of what’s expected (in other words, how to break the rules). At the end of the documentary came a song titled “My House,” which neatly pulled together the lessons I had been learning over the past year. The lyrics to that track have echoed in my mind. In Beyoncé’s “My House,” the outro states,

Lend your soul to intuitions
RENAISSANCE, new revolution
Pick me up even if I fall
Let love heal us all, us all, us all

So what does this all have to do with breaking the rules? At first, when I sat down to write this essay, I couldn’t think of a single compelling point to make. It wasn’t until a prompt in my career counseling class that I was able to begin this essay. While doing a career mapping activity, the prompt asked us about influential people in our lives. I started with people like my grandmother, mother, aunt, and great-grandmother. Then I thought about my friends and my students. Then I thought about my experience in the SaLT program. What made that experience an influential life moment for me?

As I mentioned earlier, the SaLT program was one of the few spaces where I felt like I could breathe on campus. When I began pedagogical partnership work, I was suffocating. My undiagnosed anxiety felt like a heavy fog that impacted every aspect of my life. My anxiety also gave me the skill of being hyperaware of others, how they respond to questions, what moves them, and what are the undertones of a conversation at any given moment. I could share those thoughts with my faculty partner(s) and fellow student consultants in a way that didn’t add to my constant overthinking. The student consultant meetings were also a space where I felt heard,

valued, and like my perspective mattered. I also knew that outside of that space was a battlefield. Between committee meetings, working groups, and social clubs, I was constantly in fight mode.

A fuller reflection on how partnership work aided in my survival didn't become clear until I started writing this essay. When I first started writing, I knew I wanted to write about rulebreaking because the concept seemed to resonate with many of the conference participants. Thinking about rule breaking led me back to my grandmother. I called her while writing this essay because I realized I had never shared with her how she has impacted me (another emphasis on giving people their flowers while they're here). Although she didn't remember this story exactly, she did agree with my takeaways. She also shared that people are always surprised when someone says "Dr. Shirley" or "Dr. Seay" that the person they are referring to is her. She also encouraged me to continue fighting for what is right. This was my affirmation that I was on the right track.

Finally, a thread for this essay came to me. This isn't an essay solely on pedagogical partnerships and rule breaking as a form of justice work. This is also a lesson on the power of supportive communities, affirmation, and love in work that leads to change. Like the lengthy emails I send to my students, I leave you with a too long; didn't read (tl;dr):

- Do what you want because liberation is within reach.
- Accept the kind words and affirmations that come your way.
- Let love lead the revolution.

References

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