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To Hover Amidst the Zip: Reflections on Moments of Silence in Literacy Classrooms

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Today will be full of moments of silence. Another school shooting yesterday, another set of tributes to the children and educators lost, another opportunity to reckon that will never be a reckoning. There will be calls to stillness. We'll be asked to pause.

We'll take a moment before the chatter resumes and the agenda moves forward.

Stillness is invited on these days, the many—too many—days in the aftermath of horror. It will be too brief. It will feel limp in the face of individual and collective rage, grief, fear, and exhaustion. I find myself questioning the impulse.

But I want and need that moment. I need to suspend within the movement of this day to attune to the feeling of bearing witness. And if it's the least we can do to pause...to absorb, maybe I can find a way to make the most I can of it. Specifically, I've been pulled to think about the potential of pause in literacy classrooms, those spaces we need to make a refuge for children and young people, even as they are proven unsafe, in multiple ways, over and over again. We can't stop pushing for systemic change to stop the bullets, of course; and, at the same time, we can seize every day to mitigate the other sources of violence schools too often inflict on students, including devaluing and dismissing their knowledge, histories, who they are, and what they bring to their school

literacies. That injustice has been ingrained in US schooling since its inception, but right now, students of color, LGBTQ students, particularly trans students, and womxn, are under a wave of legislative attack in many states. The devaluing and dismissal of students' intersectional lives is being inscribed into law and, even in states where this is not the case, let's not kid ourselves about the chilling impacts of those efforts that reverberate across borders and communities.

In the face of deafening injustice, it can feel anathema to turn to the power of quiet, but we know quiet and pause is a force. We are reminded of that power by writers and poets, from Patel's (2016) urge to pause as a decolonizing act of resistance to Lorde's (1993) poem, "Echoes", reflecting on "listening in that fine space between desire and always the grave stillness before choice" (p. 7). I remind myself that to pause is a verb. To lean into stillness is an action. To take a moment is far from inert. It takes will to slow, to pause, and consider and act on what stillness offers. In taking those actions, we can sense how the dimensions of not rushing forward, of settling in place, are felt, embodied. So, I ask myself, what is a moment of silence *doing*? What can it offer today and every day to reflect on pause, stillness, hovering in place? Consider what follows a brief contemplation on one shimmer in the prism of how pause can offer a moment-to-moment movement toward justice in classrooms.

Immersing in that idea of the pause amidst the bustle and relentlessness of all that literacy educators and students are navigating, I find myself invited to metaphor. Among the proliferating metaphors to which we might turn when reflecting on pause, I'm drawn to one that has captivated my imagination recently: the hummingbird. Why the hummingbird? Because they both hover and zip. The image of the hummingbird, and my own experience with these, my favorite bird, help me think about the pause required, the lingering necessary in literacy classrooms, as both literal and metaphorical. It is literal in that pausing to listen closely, to invest in relationship, to sit with students' knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, allows us to see what it is impossible to fathom otherwise. The pause becomes metaphorical as this place of knowing brilliance and depth is present in each student, even as educators are compelled to zip through all that is required in any given workday at a pace that allows us to function in our respective roles. Each encounter with a student—in the classroom or through the literacies we immerse in after the hum of the teaching day has ended—gets to shimmer with curiosity, significance, and promise. There is the promise embodied by each student—even if we can't linger with every student or every page every day, we know that promise is there. We can assume brilliance when hovering with a child, lingering to decipher a young person's meaning, even on days when the literal pausing has escaped us.

Stillness is required to see and to marvel. If there were not ways to look closely, to freeze frame, to sit completely still near enough to the feeder to absorb the colors, the remarkable abilities of what is right in front of us, we'd miss it. That shimmering little bird is moving too fast to see the details that make it the wonder that it is. There are so many other things pulling attention away, things far easier to focus on. To see with our own eyes—the impossible shimmer of those tiny feathers, the blur of those wings, the needle-thin beak, so perfectly designed to sip all the sweetness it can find—takes patience. To experience that wonder is a decision. To stop motion long enough to discern detail in a fleeting moment is an act. To turn that noticing into demonstrating to children and youth that their knowledge is seen and

valued, that they matter in what happens in classrooms, even amidst brutal efforts to excise their lives and histories from the texts and textures of schooling—that is everyday activism.

Hovering must happen amidst the zip. Like the hummingbird, we are gifted with the ability to hover, to bring the rush to a stop in mid-air. When we linger with a child's words, on or off the page, turning it in all the ways we can to see how it catches the light, it shows the promise of that writer, reader, wondrous human—no matter how, on the surface, they may be seen as “struggling” with aspects of school literacies. I think about this in the context of school writing. A child's writing is telling us a story, testifying to something about the life of that writer—it may be insights into life experiences; insights into a particular talent for a well-chosen word, a vivid image, a vibrant voice on the page, insights into a unique perspective or a passion for a topic, insights into activism, insights into life in school related to *how they're seen* in school. Insights from a packed page, insights from an empty page. Silence demands its own witnessing.

I run across a description of this tiny, fierce creature, in an online essay on hummingbirds' presence in Emily Dickenson's poetry (by an unnamed author who goes by “The Literary Tourist”), “the unattainability of the hummingbird, the impossibility of capturing, naturally, its rapidly moving wings, or the velocity with which it motions itself into the air” (The Literary Tourist, 2020). This description feels apt in my reflections here. In our own stillness, awaiting the hover of the child, we might feel the important impossibility of fully knowing. In the next moment, we must be the ones suspended from our own rushing forward to sink into that gravity of stillness Lorde turns us toward, the pause to ponder before a rush to decision, a decision that could, no matter how small, impact that precious child, that precious moment, that precious fleeting day. The beauty in what we can and must see needs to be absorbed and needs to be fuel for anti-oppressive action. In the very same moment, we can be propelled to action by what we cannot ever fully know of the crucial and fathomless mystery of all this human holds.

So, we can channel the hover amidst the zip—and spread out that lingering, those moments of silence, across students over time, to make it harder to feel so assured in our knowing and to find hope in seeing what we can't afford to miss.

References

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