

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Finding My North Star While the Ground Shifts: Letters from a Canary Still Singing

URSULA THOMAS

Dear Higher Education,

I am writing to you from the mountain—not the summit you celebrate in brochures and strategic plans, but the steep, unstable terrain where Black women climb without ropes, without witnesses, and often without rest. This is a letter from the social justice mountain, where the air is thin and the warnings arrive early, long before collapse is acknowledged.

I have traveled far to stand here. My journey has not always required movement across borders, but it has demanded constant migration—of identity, of faith, of belonging. I have learned to pack lightly, carrying only what cannot be taken: my voice, my people, my memory. Still, you ask me, and others like me, to prove our worth repeatedly, to measure our brilliance against metrics never designed to hold us.

So I write with a question that has become both compass and confession: What is my North Star when the ground shifts beneath me? When policies change overnight, when commitments evaporate, when justice becomes dangerous rather than celebrated—what guides me then?

I have been the canary in your mines. I have felt the change in air before you named the crisis. I have been asked to translate grief into data, harm into strategy, survival into professionalism. Yet I am still here, still singing—not because the conditions are safe, but because silence would be a deeper erasure.

This letter is not a request for permission. It is an offering. A record. A warning wrapped in care. I invite you to read not for comfort, but for clarity. The mountain is speaking. I am one of its voices.

Migrations Without Moving: Identity, Institution, and Choice

My migrations have not always been geographic, but they have always been consequential. Like the long tradition of movement embedded in Black survival—from Harriet Tubman forward—I have learned that staying still is often not an option. When I was informed that I would be moving to my third campus in just over a decade, I had to decide which perspective would guide me. Would I read this moment as opportunity or as erasure? As agency or as confinement?

What I came to understand was that this was migration, whether chosen or imposed. The labor was not only physical, but emotional and spiritual. Despite consistent leadership credentials and documented contributions, the move carried the risk of being perceived as diminished or displaced. The power, I realized, did not lie in the event itself, but in how I named it.

I chose to follow an internal compass rather than allow the institution to define my identity. This journey was larger than any campus. It was an intellectual and spiritual reckoning—one that required me to ask how moments of othering could be metabolized into clarity rather than corrosion. That compass would soon be tested, not in theory, but in the visible, surveilled labor of equity work.

Critical Incident One: Teaching Truth in Hostile Terrain

That test arrived through curriculum. Over the last several years, my work has centered on reframing sociocultural curriculum in institutions increasingly hostile to its naming. This labor has unfolded under scrutiny—by governing bodies, legislative mandates, and institutional actors wary of attention. The work required precision, protection, and sometimes stealth. We were expected to update curriculum while ensuring it was not disrupted, diluted, or dismantled.

There was nothing radical about what I proposed. I did not call for the abandonment of rigor or the dismantling of the academy. I asked instead that students be invited to name power, culture, and history as living forces shaping their education. I asked that we tell the truth.

Yet truth, when embodied by a Black woman, is often recoded as threat. My work was interrogated less for its scholarly grounding than for its perceived tone. Questions of “balance” and “objectivity” surfaced, along with concerns about student discomfort. Justice, it seemed, was acceptable only if abstract—never personal, never accountable.

This was my first canary moment. Emails grew cautious. Meetings multiplied without resolution. Leadership became liability. I learned quickly that sociocultural knowledge is welcomed as theory but resisted as practice—especially when it unsettles dominant narratives or demands structural change.

In that resistance, my North Star clarified. It could not be approval or consensus. It had to be coherence—between what I teach, what I believe, and who I refuse to betray. The discomfort my work generated was not failure; it was confirmation. When curriculum becomes suspect, the body delivering it soon follows. The cost of truth, I learned, is rarely abstract.

Critical Incident Two: Liability Insurance and the Cost of Voice

The consequences of that truth soon became material. In the wake of curricular scrutiny and state legislation naming “divisive concepts,” I made a decision I had never made in my thirty-one-year career: I increased my professional liability insurance.

This was not prompted by misconduct or incompetence. It was prompted by clarity. I was not advised to be careful; I was advised to be covered. The distinction matters. One suggests wisdom. The other assumes inevitability.

There was no meeting or reprimand—only a quiet online transaction. A budget line adjusted to protect myself from the very systems that claim to value my leadership. Risk management became personal, racialized, and lonely.

Liability insurance did not make me safer. It made the truth undeniable: that advocacy carries financial consequence; that voice is often framed as exposure; that institutions rely on the foresight of those they fail to protect. I chose voice anyway. The premium was financial. The cost of silence would have been spiritual.

This was the canary still singing—now budgeting for survival. And it would not be the last warning.

Critical Incident Three: CCAMPIS and Equity Dismantled in Real Time

The most devastating canary moment arrived with the dismantling of CCAMPIS—the Child Care Access Means Parents in School program. As a principal investigator, I witnessed firsthand the violence of this loss. The harm was not only to parenting students, but to their children—many under the age of five—whose stability depended on this support.

CCAMPIS was never supplemental. It was structural. It acknowledged a truth the academy often ignores — that students are caregivers, that persistence is relational, and that equity requires material investment. Watching it disappear was like witnessing equity die in real time.

The language surrounding its end was technical—budget lines, compliance, shifting priorities—but the impact was visceral. Panic rippled through families. Care plans collapsed. Dreams were deferred. Policy failure became embodied grief.

I was expected to respond with data and composure, but grief does not move at the pace of governance. CCAMPIS exposed the limits of performative equity and the fragility of commitments tied to convenience. It revealed how parenting students remain invisible until their absence becomes useful.

This loss forced a reckoning: systems built on grants rather than guarantees will always fail those most in need. The devastation was not accidental. It was policy by design. Equity that can be withdrawn was never equity at all.

My North Star shifted again. Advocacy could no longer rest on hope. It had to be rooted in refusal—refusal to accept temporary care as justice, access without sustainability, or language without moral commitment.

Becoming Through Loss

After all of this, I had to ask who I was becoming. The choice was stark: cynicism or clarity. Survival without self-erasure required redefining success beyond institutional approval and toward community accountability. That return—to something older than the academy—became essential.

Faith, Sankofa, and Ancestral Guidance

That return is what I now call faith. Like the Sankofa bird, I look back in order to move forward. I carry my ancestors—their scripture and folk wisdom, their strategies and endurance. I ask how my grandmother survived structural harm with dignity intact. I draw from a lineage that teaches me that faith is resistance and grounding.

This inheritance steadies me when my body wants to collapse and my mind seeks autopilot. Rooted this way, I speak again—not from exhaustion, but from memory.

Closing Letter: Still Singing

Dear Higher Education,

I am still writing to you from the mountain. I have not descended, nor have I been rescued. What I have gained instead is clarity—irreversible and hard-earned.

I no longer ask whether the air is safe. I have learned how to breathe anyway. I have watched programs disappear and equity treated as optional when inconvenient. I have learned that justice without permanence is performance, and protection without accountability is illusion.

I remain—not because staying is easy, but because leaving would abandon those whose names never enter your reports. I carry my ancestors now. They steady me when the ground shifts. They remind me that survival is not silence, faith is not compliance, and communal joy is resistance.

This letter is not a farewell. It is a warning and a witness. The canaries are still singing. We are still here. If you choose not to listen, know this: the mountain remembers who paid attention when the air began to change.

I will continue to climb. With or without you.

*With clarity and care,
Ursula Thomas*

About the Author

Dr. Ursula Thomas is a nationally recognized educator, scholar, and leader whose work focuses on advancing equity, inclusion, and excellence in education. With more than two decades of experience shaping teacher preparation and leadership programs, she has published seven books and over forty-seven scholarly works, including *Navigating Black Joy for Black Women Leaders in Higher Education—Spaces for Authentic Freedom* (Forthcoming, September 2026).

A sought-after consultant and thought leader, Dr. Thomas advises educational organizations on diversity, curriculum design, and leadership development. Her service includes national and international accreditation work through NAEYC, CAEP, and ACE, as well as mentoring emerging leaders across the country. Known for her visionary leadership and commitment to social justice, Dr. Thomas has been recognized with numerous awards and fellowships, including the Cole Fellowship, NISOD Faculty Excellence Award, and LiberatED SEL Fellowship.