

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Restoring Our Brilliance, Sustaining Our Power: Healing Wisdom for Leading in Challenging Times

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Dear Higher Ed,

So many obstacles arose to keep me from writing this letter today: two unwell children (one navigating chronic medical conditions and the other unable to leave their bed due to persistent anxiety); an EOA complaint from a faculty member; an exploding inbox filled with student, faculty, chair and administrative requests. Yet here I am writing. It's nothing short of a miracle. When you lead at home and at work, there will always be a million reasons not to write. At the end of the day, though, you decide what matters—who and what deserves your care.

This morning, I woke up early and tended to myself first. I walked, listening to GirlTREK's Self-Care School podcast, took a long shower (two things I sometimes forfeit when life becomes too much). But not today. I was as present as I could be for my children but then had to surrender them and all my parental worries knowing that I cannot solve every problem, nor protect them from every threat (biological or social). I can only offer them the wisdom I've been entrusted with and remind them that they are deeply loved. I responded to the faculty member in need with affirmation and an invitation to meet. Then I closed the door to my office, sat down and read a short devotion, and re-read the lyrics of the song "Be Still and Know" (Housefires 2023) that I listened to on the way to work to feed my spirit.

Next, I wrote down the words that I needed to carry with me, that I wanted to embody and have direct and orient how I showed up. I wrote what I believed to be true: "The promises of God are real. I am surrounded with the evidence of them everywhere I look so that I will not forget who I am, whose I am, and where God has brought me from." When I take time to pause, to be still, I return to myself and everything becomes clear. This is how I practice a leadership of presence.

Choosing to prioritize not only my external health (the health of my physical body) but also my interior (spiritual) life, despite the forces that would have me do otherwise, announces to me and others that "I am sacred. I am made for freedom, and I am worthy of wholeness." This daily choice is what enables me to stay human and to show up in the world fully present and fully resourced. Present and full does not mean perfect or at 100% capacity. On this day, it means showing up to a faculty mentor meeting a little later than planned, but I would rather enter the room present, full, and a bit late than on time and depleted as a divided self. This grounded leadership is necessary for transformation. And it's the kind of leadership we deserve.

We may not be able to control the external realities and forces in our lives but we always, always get to decide how we respond. I aim to choose grounded presence every time. And when I fall short, I know this is a place, a posture, I can always return to again, and again.

I begin this letter with a narrative of embodied presence because it is the only way for us to lead and sustain our humanity within inhospitable contexts – organizations and institutions shaped by systems of domination that bell hooks often referred to as "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy" (hooks 2004, 17) Ensuring

that such systems of domination do not destroy our bodies and spirits requires a commitment to radical care. Ensuring that our leadership is grounded in liberation rather than domination requires constant vigilance and a relentless practice of surrender. I know what you're thinking right now. Surrender? How does surrender get us to a more liberated future? How does surrender sustain our humanity and our leadership in impossible circumstances?

Well, I wondered the same thing until I began listening (really listening) to the wisdom of Black women. Here's what they said:

Surrendering to what we need is the first step toward creating the world we want (Boyd 2016).

"*Surrender* is not weakness. It is a *necessary* posture that protects the soul" (King 2025, 2nd para.).

"Surrender is not a giving up; it is giving over. When I put down what is not mine to carry, I am free" (Raheem 2022, 62).

Here's what I heard:

Leading from a posture of surrender grounds our leadership in a commitment to liberation rather than domination.

Leading from a posture of surrender protects our energy and limited resources (mental, spiritual, and physical).

Leading from a posture of surrender supports our restoration and recovery as humans.

While many of us are called to leadership because of our commitment to justice and equity, doing this work in contexts designed to destroy us is costly.¹ Our bodies remember and we carry that cost with us . . . an accumulated toll of unacknowledged harm and open wounds. Surrender, however, restores our brilliance, sustains our agency and power, making possible our liberation as we release all things beyond our control and those things we were never meant to hold.

As one who does justice work from within a Black and female body, I carry not only my own fears and anxieties born of personal experiences of harm, I also carry within me the inherited anxieties of generations before me: mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and great-great-grandmothers who survived the unspeakable. I once believed that pain was the cost of carrying their stories within me. I now know that I can remember their stories, holding fast to their wisdom, resilience, and creativity, while releasing the pain. After surrender, dignity remains. Presence and surrender remind me that we were made for freedom and wholeness—offering a pathway to claim what is rightfully ours. As such, this embodied knowing is both gift and burden.

A practice of presence and a posture of surrender, though never easy, enables us to fully access and exercise our power in the world. This practice is what sustains us in impossible circumstances enabling us to ward off despair by sourcing joy, beauty, gratitude, and hope in the midst of struggle. It is how we honor the sacredness

¹On the resignation of Claudine Gay, see Gay, Claudine. 2024. "News By President Gay." Harvard University, January 2. <https://www.harvard.edu/president/news-gay/2024/personal-news/>.

On the death of Antoinette Candia-Bailey, see Hollis, Linda P. 2024. "Dying to Be Heard?" *Inside Higher Ed*, January 22. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/01/22/tragedy-workplace-bullying-opinion>.

On threats to Black Women's Leadership, see Suarez, Cyndi. 2023. "The State of Black Women Leadership is in Danger." *Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 28. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-state-of-black-women-leadership-is-in-danger/>.

of our own life and the lives of those who came before us. Even more, this is the only way to honor the full humanity of those we serve without sacrificing our own.

On this day, like every day, I conclude my efforts towards justice and equity, imperfect and incomplete yet fully human, with Lucille Clifton's poem, "won't you celebrate with me" (1993):

*come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.*

Clifton reminds us that whatever comes, whatever came on this day, we are called to celebrate this truth with gratitude and joy: We are still here.

May we continue . . .

*With joy, gratitude, and hope,
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Dr. Tisha M. Brooks serves as Professor of African American literature and Associate Dean for Policy, Faculty Development, and Antiracism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She

is author of the book *Spirit Deep: Recovering the Sacred in Black Women's Travel* (2023). Her current research focuses on transformational leadership in higher education, specifically developing a framework for leadership that centers Black women's experiences and alternative ways of knowing. Through her work, Brooks seeks to transform traditional perceptions of leadership by modeling and inviting others to engage in embodied leadership practices grounded in justice, equity, and sustainability.