Welcoming "Not Yet": Personal, Professional, and Political Changes in the Classroom

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1   Introduction

Each evening around 7:00, I (Lindsey) have two wiggly toddlers, wet hair from their bath, clean pajamas on, cuddle up next to me as we read books together before bed. One of their favorites is called *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018). In it, a classroom full of kids from all kinds of different life experiences get to know one another. There are some lines toward the end that read:

There will be times when the world feels like a place that you're standing all the way outside of… and all that stands beside you is your own brave self – steady as steel and ready even though you don't yet know what you're ready for. There will be times when you walk into a room and no one there is quite like you until the day you begin to share your stories. And all at once, in the room where no one else is quite like you, the world opens itself up a little wider to make some space for you. (p. 32).

I think often about that last line, and what it means to make space for people to belong – in particular, my students – in the classroom, and how powerful those relational connections can be in a world that feels so polarized. In his book, *The Enduring, Invisible, Ubiquitous Centrality of Whiteness* (2022), Ken Hardy describes how a focus on "product" over "process" (p. 20) reflects the centrality of whiteness in so many spaces. In academia, most systemic therapy programs have focused some effort on recruiting students of Color and increasing "cultural awareness": limited, stereotypic descriptions of how to work with different groups of people (often from a white-therapist perspective). These are examples of "product" ways of thinking that only impact change on a very superficial level.

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"Process" changes are more difficult: they require a shift in epistemology (Hardy, 2022). This involves changing the academic system itself: closely evaluating the white ideologies, principles, and values that often serve as a foundation for the theories we teach (who was afforded the opportunity to research, publish, and become known as the "expert?"), the materials we require students to read (whose voices are privileged or marginalized, and in what other non-academic spaces – community groups, blogs, podcasts, etc. – is valuable information available?), the ways we ask them to sit with clients (who defines "professionalism?"), how we evaluate them (prioritizing individual growth over group processes), and who they see represented in positions of power (predominantly white people).

Early social justice educators helped initiate this shift away from "product" toward "process" by explicitly incorporating conversations about intersectional identities with trainees to help them understand both their own areas of privilege or marginalization, and the oppressive factors impacting clients' lives (McGoldrick et al., 1999). Others emphasized the need for contextual exploration across all courses and highlighted ways to move people who have been on the margins toward the center (McDowell & Shelton, 2002). More recently, educators continue to engage in "tough and transformative conversations" (Eppler, 2021) about the centrality of whiteness in leadership (Hardy, 2022; Quek & Hsieh, 2021), the struggles of faculty of Color (Hardy & McGoldrick, 2019; Quek & Hsieh, 2021), and the painful, often re-traumatizing experiences of students of Color (Allan & Singh Poulsen, 2017; Hardy & Bobes, 2016).

While there is a growing body of literature on the importance of addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion more adequately in systemic training programs, most of what exists emphasizes classroom processes with a focus on what students need to learn to be more contextually aware. Relatively little research addresses the experiences of family therapy educators as we try to put these principles into practice in teaching. When my co-editor Christie and I began working on this volume, one of the things we continued to circle back to was the hope that this would be a collection of these experiences, rather than a "how-to" guide, shared by systemic therapy educators. To this end, we asked chapter authors to share two or three moments of impact in teaching that supported increased awareness of social justice issues: times when there was a connection and growth, or times when there was a "miss" and a need for repair. In this volume, authors described shifts at three different levels:

1. Personal: interactions with students that create better understanding of issues of power.
2. Professional: interactions with colleagues that provide support and accountability.
3. Political: interventions aimed at changing the larger academic institution.

Through each of their stories runs the common thread of the importance of relationships: justice is inherently relational! It is in these "in between" spaces that we continue to be changed. We are so grateful to the authors whose voices are included in this text: systemic educators and clinicians who have committed themselves to cultivating diverse learning communities where equity and inclusion are prioritized.

Please note that throughout this book, each chapter reflects the capitalization of "people of Color," "Black," "white," etc., preferred by that chapter author. We hope that in reading their stories, you too will feel supported and encouraged, as we have, in working toward a more just academic and therapeutic landscape.

In this chapter, my co-authors (two of my students, Nicki and Gaby) and I will reflect on a classroom experience that changed all three of us in different ways and moved me as an educator toward more equitable, anti-racist teaching practices. This created a ripple across each of the above levels of change: we were each changed personally, it impacted my conversations with colleagues (professional change), and lastly it changed the way I teach that class (political change). You will hear about this experience from each of our perspectives, and we will summarize some of the themes that surfaced during this process: the helpfulness of a "not yet" approach to learning, the relationship between white supremacy and perfectionism, and the importance of nuanced, relationship-grounded repairing conversations.

2 My Identities: Lindsey

I am now in my tenth year of teaching at a small, liberal-arts university in Washington state. The university sits in an interesting location, wedged between the more urban, liberal city of Tacoma, and the very rural, conservative towns that skirt Mt. Rainier. Our MFT program is compact, with only three faculty members, a number of contract supervisors, and a cohort of about 20 students who join us each year. Until May 2022, we had been a group of three white faculty; we have since hired two new faculty, one Black man and one Chinese-American woman, who joined us in Fall 2022. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 deeply impacted us as a program, and I look back now on that as the beginning of a shift away from a "diversity" model toward an explicitly anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic culture.

In addition to being a teacher, I am also a wife, a mom, and the descendent of Scottish, Irish, and German immigrants. My husband and I live on a small farm with our 3.5-year-old, 2-year-old, and a new baby who came into our family just 1 month ago. My faith is another significant part of my identity. I grew up a fourth-generation Seventh-day Adventist and have gone through many iterations of my faith, especially in the last 5 years. When it no longer felt congruent to attend a church where women could not be ordained, we began remotely joining an SDA off-shoot church in California that is explicitly social-justice oriented. It has felt healing to us in many ways to connect with a group where spiritual leadership is mostly people of Color, queer folks, and women.

3   Background of Experiences

One of my recent teaching experiences (Fall 2022) directly shaped some new under-standings of myself, others, and socially just teaching in the classroom. In 2020, our university published a series of seven actions toward institutional equity and anti-racist practices, meant to help move us from goals toward actionable change. These included specific interventions like changing our hiring processes, creating a culture of "critical care" that interrupts our culture of "busy," undoing policies that have had a disproportionately harmful impact on faculty and students of Color, and revising curricula to decenter whiteness. During our faculty retreat that fall, we reviewed these principles and talked in-depth about ways we could integrate them into our MFT program.

One of the courses I taught for the first time was our introduction to systems theory concepts for the incoming cohort. I significantly revised the syllabus to include a substantial amount of reading from experts of Color, including a week on "emotional regulation in social justice work." I had two readings for that day, both written primarily by women of Color. We talked about context and identities in ses-sion from a power-aware perspective, ways that emotions can prompt us to contrib-ute unwittingly to oppression, can intervene in our ability to see and resist oppression, and can also fuel resistance to oppression (Garcia et al., 2015), and ways in which we can empathize with others, even those who represent groups of people who have been harmful to us historically.

In an activity based on one of the readings, I asked students in small groups to think about some scenario questions on power, and how their own intersecting iden-tities impact emotional regulation when it comes to caring about power and how this impacts clients' lives. The reflection prompt at the end was "what will help me most in learning to regulate my emotions (by naming and validating, and responding authentically) when I notice big feelings coming up in therapy?" As groups were forming and discussions began happening around the room, two students (my co-authors, Gaby and Nicki) – both women of Color – raised their hands and asked me to come over to their group. They expressed feeling some hesitance about this activ-ity and believed this stemmed from it centering a white experience of what it means to be empathetic in session.

I was not sure what to do next. I knew this would probably be (or need to be) an in-depth discussion, and small groups were already in-progress. I did not know if I should pause them and bring us all together, or wait and have a conversation with Gaby and Nicki on our own (I worried this would feel like a dismissal). I also found myself thinking ahead and worrying about where this could go; I knew as a white faculty member, I probably had some blind spots around this and wanted to know what Gaby and Nicki were feeling. I also felt strongly that the initial message I had been trying to get across through the readings and activity was important; that we should (and this has to be nuanced, of course) be able to empathize with people who are different from us.

I ended up not stopping the small groups already in-progress, but asked Gaby and Nicki if we could talk more about what they were saying at the end of the activity when everyone could be involved. For context, about half of the group were people of Color, about half were white, and about 1/3 identified as queer or non-binary/gender non-conforming. As I listened and asked questions, the disconnect between my intent and impact became clear. While my intent had been to acknowledge how our lived experiences impact our emotional bandwidth for empathizing with clients who are harmful or represent harmful systems, the message students of Color heard was "no matter the situation, your job is to show up with empathy and validate." This felt like a "coddling" of the hurt being perpetuated, and like I was asking them to be scapegoats for accountability, when people of Color are already asked to take care of whites in so many other contexts (Hardy, 2022).

This conversation, and another that followed between Gaby, Nicki, and myself, was one of the most impactful of my teaching career. Gaby shared, "I can't do empathy without vulnerability, and asking me to empathize (and therefore be further vulnerable) may not be safe. Empathizing feels like perpetuating this image of a Black woman I can't be… a Mamie figure who just smiles and takes it. There are so many layers to this servitude of self that I already experience. Sometimes I feel like the 'giving tree' that is expected to be happy to just be left as a stump." Nicki reflected, "As women of Color, we already know how to regulate our emotions… we have to do that all the time just to get through the day." Gaby added, "I won't agree with the opinions of all people of Color. So just because those articles were written by women of Color doesn't mean I'll agree with them or that they represent my experience."

Of course, I thought, all of that makes sense! The problem was not that empathy was not an important issue for therapists from marginalized backgrounds; it was that the process and issues involved might be different, and that the way I had presented the assignment framed all students as coming from a place of some power. As I allowed myself to let go of my fear around being wrong, being found out, being called out, etc., I stepped into a both/and space where I could hold onto myself (stopping myself from going into perfectionistic shame and fragility) and also hear the impact I had had on students. It felt very important in that moment that I be able to do both of these simultaneously for us to move toward better understanding and connection. I continue to be grateful to Gaby and Nicki for their courage and emotional fortitude in coming forward with me, a white professor, when I am sure this was one of many situations they had encountered with someone in authority who "didn't get it."

4   Lessons Learned

4.1   "Not Yet"

One of the phrases I keep mentally coming back to as I try to stay engaged in dismantling my own biases and "isms" is "not yet." My tendency in the past has been to stay in a very "either/or" place when confronted with something that challenges me. I felt (and often still feel) the need to immediately make a decision about whether something is right or wrong, valid or invalid: "I don't understand that, so it must be wrong;" "That's not my lived experience, so it must not be true." I am working on allowing myself time to process things, especially with other folks who are similarly invested in this work, before arriving at any sort of conclusion. I have a sticky note taped to my computer with the phrase "not yet" to help remind myself of this when I feel pulled to that place. Instead of "I don't understand that, so it must be wrong," I'm working on reminding myself: "I don't understand that – yet." That "yet" feels like a powerful reminder that (1) I am allowed to be wrong, (2) I am allowed to not know something, and (3) I am allowed to change over time.

That requires me to continue to do a lot of my own work around unpacking how those original assumptions came to be. In so many relationships in my own life, there was always a winner and a loser in each argument: a view supported by the dominant culture which emphasizes individual, competition, and power-over (Hardy, 2022). I rarely saw anyone say "I'm sorry," and there seemed to be great shame in being wrong about something. These patterns make seeing things from someone else's perspective difficult, which, of course, mirrored the process happening in class that day. I needed to be able to see things from my students' perspectives, which were widely varied across the room, instead of my own. I was asking them to hold empathy, when what really needed to happen was for me to hold empathy for them.

4.2   Perfectionism as a Symptom of White Supremacy

Perfectionism has impacted me in some deeply harmful ways. I still remember a conversation with the chair of our department during my first year of teaching: I sat down in his office in tears, having just received my second set of teaching evaluations, and was wondering if I was cut out for this work. His gentle response back to me was, "have you struggled with perfectionism?" I had not had anyone name it quite like that before, and I realized how deeply rooted the need to be "right," and "good," and "enough" was within me. As I have worked on this in my own therapy, part of my unpacking has been around the connections between perfectionism and my white identity. I have long since let go of the idea that perfectionism is any sort of "trait" that I was born with. Perfectionism is deeply embedded in white

supremacist culture that tells us we cannot be whole; we cannot show up in all of our human messiness, and we cannot acknowledge our mistakes.

This kind of perfectionism directly supports racism. In her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? Conversations About Race,* Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017) says, "if we wait for perfection… we will never break the silence. The cycle of racism will continue uninterrupted." Perfectionism shows up in the classroom in all sorts of insidious ways that look like respectability politics and tone policing (Kendall, 2020). For me, it looked like my fear of being called out in front of students, and not having the "right" answer. My harmful impact on students was that this put them (in particular, my two co-authors) in a place of having to clean up my perfectionistic mess! This is something that never should have been on them in the first place. In one of her podcasts (2020), Catherine Pugh reflects, "What you do is not called 'help' when it is your mess we are cleaning." Perfectionism and its link to white supremacy is for me to continue to work on.

5 Nicki

I am a second-year graduate student in a Marriage and Family Therapy program. I just recently retired from childcare, which has been my profession for the past 10 years. Aside from being a grad student, I am also a wife and mother of two. I am a 40-year-old cisgender woman, who is half black/half white, and I identify as mixed race, bi-racial, and African American. My husband is white. Together we are trying to help navigate our mixed-race children through the racial constructs of our society, while keeping lines of communication open around race, anti-hate, anti-racism, and white supremacy. As I write this, our children are just about to turn nine and eleven. Other important aspects of my identity include being the oldest of five sisters, growing up in a feminist household, and different periods of belonging to both Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist faiths.

Growing up in an affluent area of North Tacoma and attending school in Fircrest (a small, mostly White suburb of Tacoma) meant being immersed in White culture, White-centered experiences, and learning about White-centered curriculum taught by all White educators in a predominately White institution. I was one of very few interracial or African American students and one of even fewer African American girls in most of my social settings and educational spaces growing up. Learning how to regulate my emotions as a young child was imperative so that I did not receive unwanted or harsher treatment than my White counterparts. Being aware of my intersectionalities and how my visible identities were different from the majority of my peers helped to keep me safer in these predominantly White spaces. My own experiences mirror so many others: seeing children of color treated as older than they are, and therefore having more responsibility thrust upon them than their White counterparts. In different situations, when emotions run high, keeping their feelings and emotions "in check," so to speak, is vital to the outcome of the situation and the treatment or consequence directed at that child, often to an extent beyond what they

should be managing at their age. Most people of color can relate to this importance and the need for emotional regulation for safety purposes.

In Fall 2021, during a group exercise in Lindsey's "Systems Approach to Marriage and Family Therapy" course, we were asked to reflect on what it means to regulate emotions and the benefits of doing so to help with expressing empathy while in session with a client. My classmate, Gaby, made the comment that this exercise was not designed for "us," meaning the students of Color. Without her even needing to explain her thought process, I knew immediately why she was feeling that way. As Lindsey walked up to our group to check in on us, Gaby shared this thought. It was apparent that Lindsey was not quite sure how to take this comment, but remained curious. I chimed in and explained that people of Color are experts at emotional regulation. We learn the importance of the skill as children. Lindsey still seemed uncertain about the point we were trying to make and asked us to hold our thoughts on the subject until the class reconvened as a whole after the group exercise so that all could hear and take part in the conversation.

Once the class was together in its entirety again, she asked Gaby and I to share the thoughts and comments with the class that we had just shared with her. I explained that as people of Color, it was important for us to learn emotional regulation as children for safety purposes. This extends to all marginalized communities as well. Gaby explained that in certain situations, it could be harmful for a therapist of Color to empathize with a White client if they do not hold that individual accountable for their thoughts or actions. Showing sympathy for a client, staying curious, and respecting their lived experience can still be accomplished without losing yourself as the therapist. The ways in which we bring our experiences in the broader social context into this unique role are complex, and what became clear as we continued to talk was the need to address these questions from each person's social location and position of power instead of a "one size fits all."

A couple of weeks after this class discussion, Lindsey reached out to Gaby and me for a meeting to further discuss our perspectives on the topic and to better understand where we were coming from. This really was a growing moment for all three of us. Gaby and I were able to share an even more nuanced perspective from our lens with Lindsey, and Lindsey demonstrated the humanism of being both a therapist and a professor by not challenging our lived experiences, but instead genuinely wanting to understand where we were coming from. She allowed us to impact her and shift her thinking, while simultaneously teaching Gaby and I what it looks like to humble oneself and to stay curious.

6   Gaby

There is so much conversation happening around identity, especially on college campuses. Who we are and how we identify is both deeply personal and for many of us political. I identify as an Afro-Latina, my mom is Dominican, and my father is Puerto Rican. I am a first-generation college student, and first to be working toward

a master's degree. My husband and I have been married for 8 years and have a 4-year-old and 2-year-old. The shift from being a married couple to parents has been both terrifying and incredibly rewarding. As an interracial couple we have had to be very intentional in our marriage and how we parent. A lot of our life experiences are different from each other's, and there are times when my husband, who is white, does not show up to situations in ways that I would like. He has not ever needed to think about identity in the ways that I (or in the future, our biracial children) have. It takes many open and vulnerable conversations for my view to be seen. This can be hard on a marriage.

Regardless of where people are in their anti-racist work, hard conversations must be had, and what makes them so hard is what these truths mean about our positions in the world. It is less about reaching the highest level of understanding and more about being a constant learner and evaluator of the systems around us. Building a life with someone and raising children together requires so much empathy and self-reflection. I have had to learn to empathize with my own experiences, to have empathy through the learning curves of life, and for my children who both need empathy to be modeled. My children have shown me that there is a full range of humanity, and they are teaching me patience, compassion, and the importance of inner child work.

My first semester in my MFT program, there were several conversations that challenged me and have been topics that I think about often. Our professor, Lindsey, would assign readings and then in class we would have small group discussions that then would open to the whole class. One reading was about emotional regulation as a therapist and was written by several women of color. We were asked to imagine being in different marginalized communities outside of our own real identities, and to think through how we might manage working with clients who challenge those identities. The prompt felt to me like it implicitly assumed that therapists come from a position of power. While this is often true in some regards (therapists have graduate degrees, etc.), this would have worked better if framed to identify one's actual social locations and positions of social power first. As I shared these thoughts, Lindsey heard us and brought the conversation back to the whole class. Personally, I appreciated having a whole class discussion about it – it felt like equity. Having a classroom where students can respectfully give feedback, especially for a white teacher who is talking about marginalized groups, is all the difference between oppressive environments and one that is learning and growing together.

The second conversation that came up in class was around being empathetic toward people who come from very different lived experiences. In theory that sounds solid. It also sounds like it was centered around a white heteronormative hypothetical therapist. I thought, "What would that look like for me? What am I the most nervous about?" The first thing that popped into my mind was a white man who comes into session and dumps all his racist ideas about different groups in my lap. In this hypothetical, he is polite and then angry if challenged, and entitled in the sense that he sees me and feels I should agree with whatever stereotypes he believes about people of color he has encountered. There is a long history centered around women of color and their role as caretakers.

Having this in mind, all I could think of was "How could I be empathetic toward a racist that believes it is my role to accommodate their every thought?" To that I said "HELL NO." I knew this was not what Lindsey was implying, and at the same time it felt like something she was not aware of as being ever-present for people like me. These stereotypes are very much alive and show up in various ways. Therefore, it is so important that anti-racist work and education around critical race theory happen alongside all course work and disciplines. Racism is happening all the time everywhere and facing it head-on is the only way to see how it is showing up in classrooms. Both of these conversations are for me a testament to the impact classrooms have on their students, outside of the course content. The conversations offered all of us a moment of pause to evaluate what was coming up for some of us and what was not for others. I will admit that initially my "hell no" did not come across to me as an emotional response. It was a blockade to protect myself, and had I not had a professor who wanted to know my experiences, I would not have become aware of my own biases around what I had to learn about conversations like these.

Our program has a students of color group called PLUS (PLU Students of Color). I went to this group after these interactions, feeling like I needed a space where I did not have to explain myself. I wanted to talk to other women of color about what empathy means in therapy when coming up against a client who is saying or doing things that affect us personally. What I found was a huge spectrum of thought around what empathy means when you are a marginalized person. I had to dissect empathy for myself; there is a vulnerability when we have empathy for others. It is not the difference between a therapist who has a client who has a different view about something. It is about a therapist who has a client who does not see them as a human being. That distinction between "we don't agree" and "you question my personhood" is what makes this empathy piece so challenging.

This is not the kind of topic that has resolution. But I did have a realization that I have been empathetic in situations that felt like my hypothetical. I can be empathetic without validating. I can feel empathy about the path that may have impacted someone in a way that makes them believe racist rhetoric. But I do not need to validate those thoughts. It is a delicate dance of protecting myself from emotional harm and feeling like I am the best person to handle those moments. Just to be clear, these thoughts are my own, and my opinions about these hypotheticals and the role of empathy is ever-changing. I have gone from "hell no" to "maybe." The "maybe" depends on the context and the person's level of awareness.

After this class discussion, Lindsey asked Nicki and me to have a conversation about what came up in class. I went into the meeting a bit skeptical and unsure, but what unfolded allowed the three of us to have an impactful conversation stemming from Lindsey's genuine desire to understand where we were coming from. She was willing to listen without any defensiveness, and because of that, it was a powerful exchange. Instead of putting herself in our shoes (as was the assignment in class), she just believed us. Academia places so much importance on titles, as opposed to seeing places of learning as intertwined and dependent on the transfer of information from teacher to students and students to teacher. Lindsey opening our comments to the class and then taking some time to think about it and wanting more

clarity in our second conversation honored this fluid way of learning and acquiring knowledge. I felt heard and more importantly I felt like I was a holder of important knowledge too, which was empowering.

7 Conclusion

There are two themes the three of us have continued to circle back to as our conversations around this topic keep unfolding. The first is that change happens in relationships with one another. I (LN) am changed in ways I could not be otherwise through the impact of my students and their vulnerability and care for me. No textbook, no conference, no anti-bias training impacts me the way those relationships do. Our relationships give us a framework for learning and growing, as Gaby said, in a multi-directional way. The second is that nuance matters. We do not have many examples of nuanced, productive, cross-racial conversations happening today. That needs to shift, and the responsibility lies first with white folks in listening and believing the experiences of people of Color. When I listened to Nicki and Gaby, my initial fears of "what if we don't agree on this?" quickly dissipated. As we talked through things – what empathy means to each of us, how we have experienced empathy differently, our fears around empathy, and how our different identities impact what is expected of us around empathy – we were able to connect and empathize with one another, even though our lived experiences were different. Through the gifts of relationships and nuanced conversations, we hope others – educators and students alike – can experience the transforming personal, professional, and political changes that move us all toward better caring for each other.

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