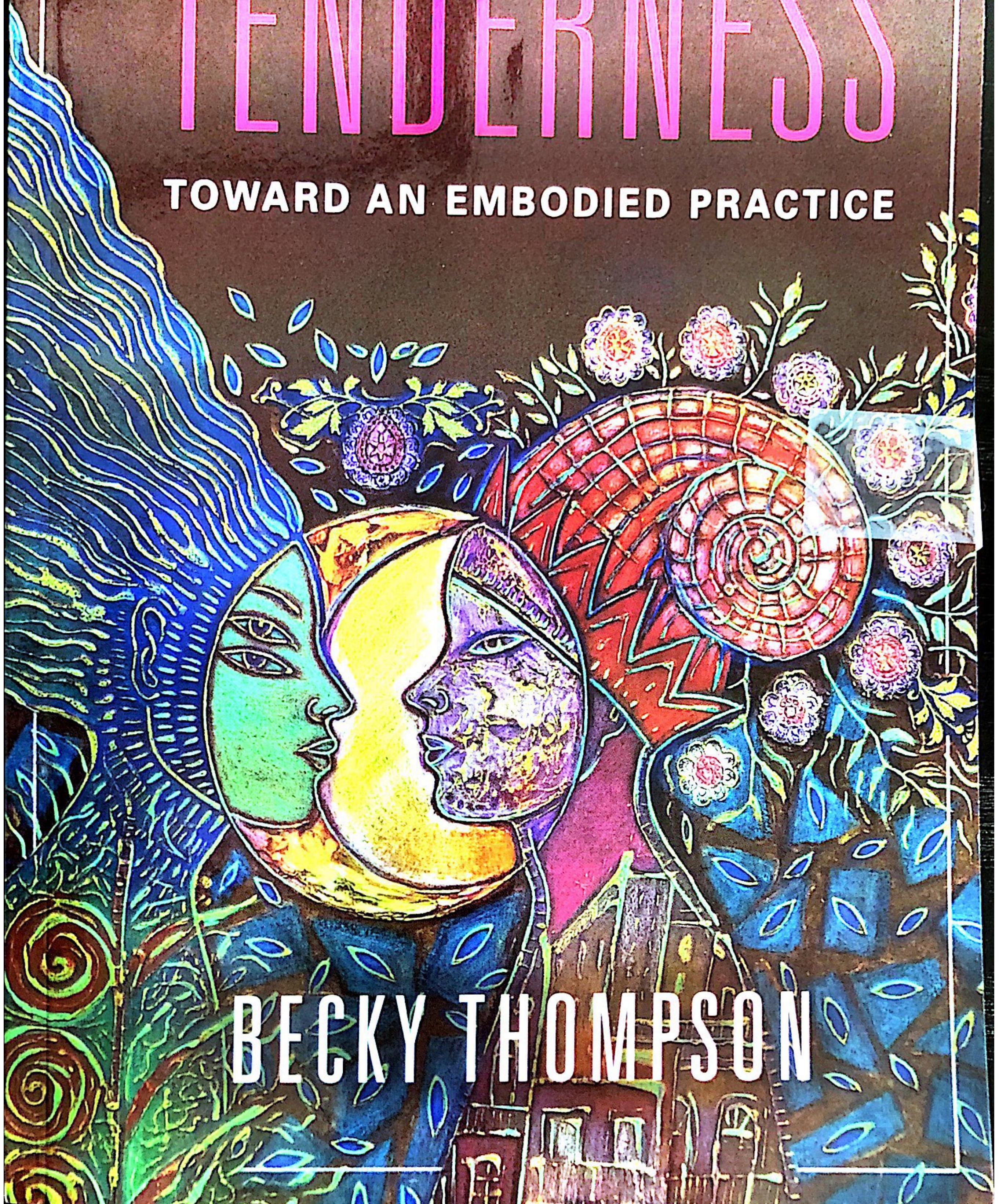
TEACHING WITH TENDERNESS

TOWARD AN EMBODIED PRACTICE



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To You, I Belong

> The way of tenderness is an intangible elixir for the clogged arteries in the heart of our world.
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> —Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality and Gender*

Historical Synapses

The place of connection and joy that we hope for in the classroom asks us to invite in a culture of belonging. Such an invitation requires understanding "belonging" in the big sense of the word—not only to the people who are physically present but also to all of their relations, both living and ancestors. When I became a mother to LaMar (many years ago now), one of the many lessons I learned, quickly, about many older "adoptions" is that they not only involve one particular child but also their whole family. Our lives are connected through history, experience, love, and hardship. In a similar way, I have come to see that students bring to the classroom their own individual stories as well as those of many others (biological and chosen family, friends, spirits). Nurturing high-quality and original writing and discussion asks us to see students as capable of tapping into knowledge and wisdom that predated their current physical presence on earth. And tapping into emotions related to this historical memory as well.

Historical memory makes us aware that the past is with us in the present, that previous unresolved, complicated, and multilayered events are replaying themselves in various forms in the present. Historical memory can be transmitted through tangible processes—writing, art, song, dance, the media, photography. This memory can be imprinted on the body (in any or all of the five sheaths). It can be imprinted on trees, stones, in taste, scent, and sound. While it can be handed down directly from one generation to the next, it can also skip generations. It can be transmitted in dreams, rituals, and visions. Much of historical

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memory resides in the unconscious, in the back body, which is partly why yoga can be so useful for tapping into this knowledge base, since the spine connects the mind~body~spirit. One place that tenderness may live is in the synapses between these connections. Because historical memory is often unconscious, it can often take the form of a haunting presence, a reminder that people have not yet come to terms with the memory and the trauma often underlying it.[1] Our work as teachers asks us to explore our own historical memories (individual and collective), so that we can then welcome this embodied awareness from students.

When We Start to Cry

Honoring historical memory inevitably requires accepting difficult emotions. I say "difficult" because it is not true that we typically don't let any emotion in the classroom. Students are permitted to come in happy, enthusiastic, and energetic. They are even permitted, although we would prefer otherwise, to come in stressed out, tired, and withdrawn. Most of us have been taught to allow only certain closely contained emotions in the classroom. Crying, getting angry, and showing grief are still largely verboten.[2] For years I dreaded those fateful moments when a student might say, in front of a faculty member or a student I didn't know, that people sometimes cry in my classes. I was afraid people would think I somehow push students to cry—that I require a certain emotive performance or that I would not know how to handle a student crying—that I was unnecessarily exposing them to difficult material. I was afraid that people would think I was practicing a form of pseudotherapy while untrained to do so competently.

Given these fears, when a student would make reference to crying, I would try to minimize or ignore the comment, which undermined the student's accurate naming and potential desire to discuss the emotional work we do in class. What I wasn't yet seeing is that there is nothing unusual or wrong about crying in classes that deal with intense historical and cultural realities.[3] I was also not yet able to admit to my own crying as a student. I have sometimes wondered if professors' fears of emotion in the classroom may partially stem from being reprimanded for being emotional when we were in grammar or high school. Do we then, as adults, discipline those same emotions in our own teaching?

Making room for difficult feelings attached to memory is not easy. There are understandable reasons many teachers avoid it. While memory is, itself, complicated, historical memory may be more so, tapping into information,

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sensations, and images often buried deep within us. One fear is that an individual student will take up an inordinate amount of time once emotion related to historical memory is tapped. In one of the classes Diane Harriford teaches, Black Intellectual History, one of the required books includes a series of photos of lynching. During a class discussion, one of the African American students spoke at length about being afraid of walking down the street after seeing the photos. The photos elicited a fear he had not consciously felt before. Some of the students admitted later that they thought Diane devoted too much time to this student's reaction. Some argued that they were paying thousands of dollars to take the class to learn. They were not there to coddle upset students.

Other students felt that Diane should have left the lynching photos out of the class or moved on more quickly to other subjects. Diane was accused of being provocative and told that showing the photos was gratuitous. Diane explained that she did not know how to teach about lynching as an abstract concept. She believed the students needed to see the photos of hundreds of white people coming to watch a lynching—to see that those who came looked like everyday white people. They weren't all KKK members—in fact, few were—and they didn't look crazy. The white people could have been someone's great-grandfather or great-grandmother. From Diane's perspective, it was important to see the brutality of the terrorism and how it was embraced within white communities.

Including the lynching photos was also a way Diane was teaching about historical memory—how visual memories are often passed down from one generation to the next. The visual can often convey what words cannot. As Bibi Bakare-Yusuf explains, "What cannot be spoken in language is evoked through other cultural representations—including dance, music and visual art (photos, painting, sculpture)." Historical memory is not an abstract concept. It lives in our unconscious, in the body. It is often preverbal—knowledge that cannot be adequately described using the master's tongue, the master's language. If the only language available to people is the language of terror (English, in the case of slavery), it may not be the language people will have access to when identifying pain. Diane explains, "I have my own eyes, not my own language," which is why she relies upon visual representations to teach about lynching. As Bakare-Yusuf writes, "It is not that pain (in this case the pain of lynching) is resistant to language. It is resistant to everyday speech."[4] This is why teaching lynching through photographs is an important intervention—it enables people to take in the knowledge through their bodies, to re-member it.

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In her work on historical memory about the attempted genocide that Native people carry in their bodies, Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan writes, "History, like geography, lives in the body and it is marrow-deep. History is our illness. It is recorded there, laid down along the tracks and pathways and synapses. . . . Those of us who walked out of genocide by some cast of fortune still struggle with the brokenness of our bodies and hearts. Terror, even now, for many of us, is remembered inside of us, history present in our cells that came from our ancestors' cells, from bodies hated, removed, starved, and killed."[5]

The challenge, then, is to help people see how much easier and familiar it is to stigmatize the student (for crying, for being upset) than to collectively look at the messages coming from the photos. White students often want to ask: How can I feel good about my whiteness and my family's whiteness when white people have caused so much terror? Some students of color ask: Given the history of racism in this country, how can I ever trust a white person? In a society where individuality is the rule, having to be responsible for each other's emotions is not what people expect. It is not what they bargained for. They had been socialized to compete for the professor's attention, as individuals, not to see each other as part of a collective. Leaving emotion out is a way of rationalizing a process that is, in fact, irrational, emotionally laden, psychically complex.

Allowing emotion—including grief that often masquerades as anger—in the classroom suggests that people have some collective responsibility to each other. As poet Joy Harjo writes, "Grief is the land of wet tenderness."[6] This is one reason that community building needs to be part of every class, not just at the beginning of the semester. Students typically enter the class feeling separate from each other. While they may come with and sit by a friend, most have been socialized to draw in once they get to class—to sit in their own chairs, open their own notebooks, think as individuals. The resocialization process to see themselves as part of a larger collective, to listen deeply to each other, to take care of each other intellectually and emotionally, has to be persistent—to help people remember the feeling of belonging and connection.[7]

Our Faces Open

Welcoming emotions tapped by historical memory depends upon faculty to get the support we deserve for ourselves and our students. Few faculty have received formal training about teaching in general, never mind about