

“¡Tahui!...password/to open the doors/of the Beyond.”

Francisco X. Alarcon

“Tahui- Lowell High School”

With respect and dedication to my late administrator Holly Giles who advocated for me while expecting the best from me, and to Ntozake Shange who told me all the reasons I wanted to leave were exactly why I needed to stay.

Every morning Lowell High School in San Francisco, California begins as a poem, where everything is one thing and one thing is everything: The soft cries of sea-gulls, the acrid exhaust from delivery trucks, the murals, the white lettering of our school’s sign framed by neon, “Lowell Academic High School”- two words that perhaps do not belong together, as they began as “Union High School,” but have regardless been conjoined by the elastic string of time.

In a school of 2700 students and over 100 teachers, space is scarce. Classrooms are shared, department offices are crammed, and the teacher’s parking lot is invariably full when those fortunate to have a late start arrive at 8:30am.

For years I have been wondering how do I do this, how do I keep doing this? How do I get high school students to have a meaningful discussions around race and gender in an environment where students feel uncomfortable and teachers think it doesn't happen. Start with Henry Frankfurt’s, “On Bullshit:” “Bullshit is a result of incuriosity of whether a claim is true or false, inflated ego, and conventional conversation.” I tell them, replace with bullshit with the word racism, or sexism, and see how the the argument still stands. But it does not lead them how to see. How to see, 400 years of it all in one semester?

Meanwhile, time is pendular, and continues its twist and turns. Everything is shadow upon distorted shadow. Sound bites. Articles, social media. Bullshit and, *c* .ha-ching The knives are pointed and positioned for attack. I can not concentrate. I need to click on another link. “The devil long ago found his work,” James Baldwin whispers in my ear. I feel submerged. Haunted. I am a teacher. I am still haunted by my teachers. I think of my students. I have a responsibility, too, to see, show what I have seen. Somewhere there is Sisyphus, in that pause, returning back up hill. I must imagine her happy, and wearing more eyeliner.

Upon the SFUSD school board’s decision to change Lowell’s admissions policy, I have seen enormous ire and entitlement and ignorance that makes me almost ashamed to say I have taught at Lowell since 2003. I have been horrified to witness students and SFUSD employees receive death threats. I have been horrified to see my administrators publicly attacked online. I am most horrified by the enormous sum, over a million dollars that was spent on recalling our school board mostly over the change to Lowell admissions, when our school alone is being faced with a 3.5 million dollar deficit, cutting all the programs that most help support our students, and prepare them for college- like our AP program and our AVID program. This deficit also means the newer teachers, who are more prepared around social justice pedagogy, will be let go.

More than any words I can offer about this situation, and a recall election that I could not vote in, as I do not live in San Francisco, our district needs money. We are in an utter financial crisis. And yet, there is a huge misunderstanding about what Lowell High School is, who belongs here, and who this school is for.

One of my students from the class of 2018, Sergio Herrera, wrote an opinion editorial, for the Lowell, “How Systematic Racism Affects Lowell Admissions.”

<https://thelowell.org/6733/opinions/how-systemic-racism-affects-lowell-admissions/>. Sergio poignantly concluded that, “changing Lowell’s admission policy won’t eradicate racism, but it will give a lot of hope to minority parents when they see their child who’s grown up in toxic environments be accepted to such a prestigious school. I know a lot of us at Lowell have parents who are immigrants and I know we remember the joy on their faces once they saw our acceptance letters. This isn’t about undermining student’s achievements in middle school, it’s about realizing that a system that mostly relies on grades is a flawed one and allows those at the top to stay at the top and forces those at the bottom to stay at the bottom. Everyone deserves a chance at an equal education. Those with 4.0 GPAs will succeed anywhere you send them. They won’t miraculously lose their smarts if they go to a high school other than Lowell. Accepting more underprivileged kids into Lowell won’t result in anyone’s hard work being for nothing. It will result in giving kids a chance to escape the cycle of poverty through education.”

I agree with Sergio, and believe any child in San Francisco who *wants* to have the opportunity to attend this school should be *welcomed* to attend Lowell.

Note that I use the word welcome instead of allowed because, as Mike Rose says in *Lives On The Boundary*, education should be an embrace not a smothering. That said, in May of 2016, I attended a series of lectures at UCSF hosted by white coats for black lives about the effects of police brutality as a public health crisis. The doctor in charge of black coats for white lives, Dr. [Rupa Marya](#), who is married to one of my classmates from Carmel High, said, “The body is a fragile thing. And the civic body is also a fragile thing, subject to diseases of unrest that can threaten our very integration. And the body of San Francisco is in critical condition because many civil servants are harming the very people they’re sworn to protect, and I am here today to insist that we do everything we can to prevent another senseless death.”

I attended these lectures because I wanted to understand how the effects of police brutality upon a community connected back to the effects of systematic racism in education- How student success was affected by how well they saw themselves in the curriculum, and more importantly whether they felt welcome in their classes.

But I already knew the answer: Not because I have been a teacher in public education for the last twenty years but because of what I experienced as a student in Carmel schools.

My friend is the poet Lee Knight Jr. His father, Commander Leroy Knight Sr. was the first black commanding officer of mother, and his mother is Dr. Charlie Knight, who was the first black superintendent for Monterey Peninsula Unified School District- The Knights were the first families to live in Carmel-by-the-sea since Langston Hughes in the 30's, and the first to own property. One of my favorite Lee Knight Jr. poems is called "Chameleon" about how he learned the word for chameleon in Carmel schools. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orKKEkpXdxA>. I have known Lee since I was born. He is one of the few people who remembers how I spoke Spanish and English when I was a toddler, and could not pronounce my t's- something that was problematic for me as I liked playing with dolls and tonka trucks. Lee always said my mother needed to do something about my mouth.

Sometimes I say too much, or, not enough. And sometimes I am still trying to find the best words in the best order for so much I have never been able to put into language.

One of the reasons I started teaching at Lowell in 2003-2004 was because one hundred years of my family has had a connection to Lowell: My grandmother's uncle, Albert Rhine, was the class of '04, 1904. My grandmother's brother, Larry Rhine, graduated in '28. My mother, Nancy Mober, graduated in '62. Hence, I guess you could say I have loved Lowell students even before I started teaching here.

Six months before my Uncle Larry Rhine died he was filmed as “one of the hundred most influential people in television history.” He proudly began his interview with how he was a graduate of Lowell High School- How he joined the student debate team because he was a bad athlete and his classmates called him “Larry Rhino”- as his nose could not hide what his last name did. He won an Emmy, a Golden Globe, and a Humanitas Award- the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for television- for his work on shows like *All In The Family* that promoted human dignity, meaning, and freedom. Yet, out of all his awards, the only honor I remember him bragging about was being named amongst the “Who’s Who” of Lowell Alumni. Graduating from Lowell meant something to him, just as it meant something to my mother who became an elementary school teacher of thirty-four years who advocated for the importance of multicultural education with the legendary educator Dr. Charlie Knight. Both my mother and my Uncle Larry were proud to be accepted into Lowell, proud to work hard, and proud to make it out of here and graduate. As my mom likes to say, “after Lowell, college was easy.”

However, I have long wondered what kind of world I am preparing my students for. Should students be basing the value and potential of their abilities completely upon test scores and grade point averages? Does “smart” necessarily equate to empathetic? How can we all do better in terms of mutual respect? I have a list of forbidden words that I insist my students not use in their writing, and find it amusing how I am going to use one of those words repeatedly, and thus rhetorically: There have been *too many* students at Lowell who say they do not feel accepted, do not feel like they belong. *Too many* students have cited examples of not just little stings or slights, but outright hostile and horrible comments. Whether these comments were said with malicious intent or not, there have been *too many* hurt feelings. We can not turn a blind eye to this, or simply think because our perspective is one way it is inconceivable that others might

not feel a different way. Yes, freedom includes freedom of speech, but some kinds of speech comes with consequences. Some kinds of speech may not be outright malicious, but it nonetheless hurts. I am very flawed, I am sure I have stepped on toes, and I know I have hurt feelings. I also am unafraid to say “I’m sorry.” Sometimes too much- to the point that it might become annoying. I’m sorry. However, I would rather say “I’m sorry” too much than too little. When someone tells or shows us that their feelings are hurt, we do not get to decide if we have really hurt them or not. We do get to decide how to respond. To say that the other person has no right to feel hurt, or should not feel hurt, is to deny their feelings and not give them respect.

Since 2016 Lowell has had problems with graffiti and hate speech and pornography that has not just been morally wrong, it has been illegal. The first commandment supersedes the first amendment. This kind of talk transcends politics. It is violent, and simply unacceptable, no matter what your political persuasion. My Uncle Larry wrote the episode of *All In The Family* where Archie Bunker found himself at a meeting for the KKK, and found himself in full agreement with the group’s ideas until he realized who the men were, and how they were planning to commit acts of violence. As a member of the human race, the only real race that there is, I do not believe in violence against my fellow man or woman, and I do not support violent language. Even in jest.

That said, we are all flawed. We are all human. We have to allow ourselves to make mistakes while striving for excellence. We have to forgive ourselves. We have to forgive ourselves so we can do better. We need to do better. Yes, I am probably preaching. I do so because I am passionate. It comes with the territory. I care about Lowell High School. I care about Lowell students. Like most teachers, I got into teaching because I think the youth can change the world for the better. And indeed, *many* Lowell students have changed the world for

the better. I care about the freedom and meaning that Lowell can engender- and the mutual respect and human dignity that is supposed to come with it.

Along with the controversies over admissions policies, walk outs over the pervasive problems with equity and racism, last fall, Lowell High School was one of many schools across the Bay Area that also had walk outs over sexual assault reporting. I think it goes without saying that the effects of sexual violence, especially sexual violence that begins in childhood, are devastating, and our justice system is an utter failure in the ways it is not victim centered, while carceral justice does little to nothing to solve this problem, and invariably makes it worse because of the lack of support programs for all sides- victims and perpetrators.

I feel so much compassion for students who aretraumatized to have to be in the same space as their abusers, or their accusers. Often times they simply do not understand consent and/or their triggers, and are ultimately equally terrified of the stigmas surrounding what they are accused of, on either side. That said, as Bret Kavanaugh literally and metaphorically demonstrates, the scales of justice are balanced upon an axis that is still very white and very male, and, in his case, and Amy Benett's, very Catholic which sometimes can be very problematic, and confusing. I was raised in the Catholic faith- Catholicism, like all religions, is a system that is supposed to be rooted in compassion. I think true compassion for others begins with compassion for ourselves, but in order to have true compassion for ourselves, we must step away from ourselves, and yet see ourselves in others, and vice versa.

So, how then does this translate into social justice movements within communities? While I realize the state of California is often limited in how to keep victims safe from their abusers while they heal, and there is a lot to be said for

restorative justice, restorative "justice" practices often only normalize trauma bonds that often take a lifetime to break because truly restorative practices can not work within a justice system that is not victim centered. What we need is **transformative** justice, starting with more funding for **trauma informed** practices, programs, and resources. In other words, as my mentor, the late poet Francisco X. Alarcon would say- "*¡Tahui!...password/to open the doors/of the Beyond.*"

So, to everything about the recall, the change to admissions, the changes young people are asking for around sexual assault reporting, and needing more anti-racism teaching practices and curriculum, I say, Tahui.

We are living history. As we look around the events as they are happening, I keep wondering- What happened? How did this happen? How could it have been different?

I keep thinking, it did not have to be this way. It does not have to be this way.

Perhaps I am an idealist. I think tolerance is not the same thing as an embrace. Tolerance is not the same thing as love. To forgive means to never forget. We need to do better. We need more cultural pluralism instead of cultural puritanism, and we need more empathy- especially when it comes to how Lowell sees itself. How can we move beyond the single story of the ways Lowell has seen itself, past, present, and future?

Months before he died, on what would be his last visit to San Francisco, my mother and I took poet and Lowell alumni Gary Rosenblatt and his wife to Sam's Grill for dinner- Not just because it was old San Francisco, and one of the few union restaurants left in this city. It just was the easiest to get to as it was blocks away from where Gary was staying.

Gary was visiting from Arizona. He still had his goats, and wore cowboy boots. I did not know it would be his last visit. He said he thought it would be the last time visiting San

Francisco, but he wanted to come back. He brought me a book by Octavio Paz. He wanted to come back. He said he still owed me a story about being a student at Lowell High School.

Gary went to elementary school and Lowell with my mom. In the senior class poles Gary won best all around. He went to Harvard. His family expected him to be an attorney, a city attorney, like his father, but he became a poet instead. At Harvard he studied with Charles Bly. Then he left the East Coast for Arizona, where he wrote psalms, and tended goats.

What no one knew at Lowell was how while he knocked out the grades- he went to North Beach, to the Spaghetti factory any chance he could as Allen Ginsberg, the great Jewish poet had read Howl right before he studied high school.

“Did you ever study any Jewish writers when you were a student at Lowell,” I asked him as we walked down Bush Street to Sam’s.

“No,” he said.

“Did it effect you?” I asked.

Probably, he laughed.

Sure, the baby boomer generation thought they could do anything. Some have argued that boomers thought of themselves as messianic. Were they? Ginsberg was the greatest generation- the greatest generation that bred the counter culture. Let’s not blame boomers and throw them under the bus.

That evening last fall walked down Bush Street to Sam’s Grill, Gary said was reading the Talmud. He said we needed to revise how we read it.

Sitting at Sam’s, an old man walked by and said I looked like a librarian. I said I was an English teacher. He laughed how he had gotten kicked out of Lowell.

Both my mom and Gary asked, “What year?”

Turns out the man had graduated a few years before my mom and Gary, and his mother was best friends with Gary's mom.

Then they laughed. Best all around. One kicked out for fighting. Their mothers were best friends.

No. These stories, these Jewish boy's stories of Lowell have not been told.

I remember at my mom's 25th reunion in 1987, how she said everyone laughed at Gary because he didn't become an attorney, or go onto academia- that he became a teacher and just wrote poetry. It was the 1987. By the 50th reunion, it was different. Too many of their classmates had died to be petty. When Gary died last February- the alumni association already knew before I called him. One of Gary's friends insisted the Lowell Alumni association say something in their newsletter. Gary really was always the best all around.

Gary's example is what inspires me to ask the questions I keep asking of my students- How do we need to move beyond the single story of the ways Lowell has seen itself, past, present, and future?