

Three Keys to Unlocking Your Criticality = Aspiration + Advocacy + Joy

CINDY O'DONNELL-ALLEN ■ MOLLY ROBBINS

Picture a 2021 cartoon in *The New Yorker* (Chast) portraying a woman who has reached her critical breaking point. With vacant eyes, frazzled hair, and a grimacing expression, she sits on her couch, surrounded by pillows. The wall above her is bedecked with framed needlepoint and artwork written in every imaginable font. All bear a ubiquitous reminder that also adorns her t-shirt: *Live, Laugh, Love*.

Now picture our alternative version of this cartoon, this time portraying a teacher whose work is informed by criticality, sans the critical breaking point. Smiling, determined, and neatly coiffed, this teacher is also surrounded by pillows, and the wall above is once again covered with framed knickknacks. All share the same message that's printed on the teacher's t-shirt, but this one reads *Aspire, Advocate, Laugh!*

Our final Genius Moves column can help you follow the latter advice by combining the framework of sustainable teaching (ST) with Gholdy Muhammad's charge that "[to] teach geniuses . . . charges teachers to cultivate their own genius that lies within them" (2020, p. 14). (You can find the theory of ST here: <https://tinyurl.com/342sz88z>.) In your quest for equity-driven teaching, consider the following questions that we've been addressing throughout these columns:

- What would it take for teachers to cultivate their genius as a matter of course?
- What practices might help us enact it on a daily basis?
- What would have to change in ourselves, our classrooms, our schools, and the profession?

Below, we apply these questions to the final pursuit included in Muhammad's

model: *criticality*. She explains that criticality helps students "to see, name, and interrogate the world not only to make sense of injustice but also to work toward social transformation" (p. 120). The following Genius Moves will help you do the same.

GENIUS MOVE #1: Aspire

Muhammad describes several approaches for helping students develop criticality, such as writing preambles, which are "clear," "bold," "powerful statements of intention and objective" to guide their learning. Teachers also benefit from writing preambles to articulate the "purpose and power of their teaching" (2020, pp. 128–9). Other approaches include writing "Fifteen Demands of Education" to improve schools and "Critical Open Letters" to inspire future generations around sociopolitical issues that students find meaningful.

We think of these assignments as aspirational texts because they move beyond expressions of hope. According to merriam-webster.com, to "hope" means "to want something to happen or be true," while to "aspire" means "to seek to attain or accomplish a particular goal" or to "ascend, soar."

According to these definitions, Muhammad's assignments qualify as aspirational because they are action oriented. Preambles function as manifestos that students read aloud during class; the Fifteen Demands statements are made public so that others beyond the classroom can read and act upon them; and Critical Open Letters are written by students at the end of the school year for the teacher to share with future classes. In other words, in completing these assignments, students don't just *hope* what they've written will happen or become

true; their words lead to work. They write to seek, attain, accomplish, ascend, and soar.

No doubt, you aspire to do these things, too. Muhammad writes that “teachers must assume and activate a critical stance in their own lives” (2020, p. 131). Toward that end, we encourage you to consider the following: What are your aspirations for practicing criticality not just in your classroom but outside of the school day, too? What do you seek to attain and accomplish? What support do you need to ascend and soar?

To help you address these questions, we’ve developed a micro-practice called *Name It to Claim It* that is based on an idea from Mary Rose O’Reilly’s book, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (1993).

This micropractice challenges you to write an aspirational job description that reflects the following behaviors of *sustainable teaching*, which are to:

- critique and dismantle inequitable systems, promote equity for all educators and learners, and heed the call toward justice; and
- build relationships with allies who will advocate on [your] behalf and help [you] locate and leverage resources to enable [your] career longevity.

As we’ve argued in previous columns, these behaviors are inextricably bound, for to move from aspiration to action, we cannot shoulder the work alone without depleting our resources and our own well-being.

GENIUS MOVE #2: Advocate

Operating from a position of criticality requires teachers to be brave as we advocate on behalf of students, colleagues, and . . . ourselves. To advocate is “to support or argue for (a cause, policy, etc.): to plead in favor of” (merriam-webster.com). Thus, by definition, when we choose to advocate, we stand in opposition to someone, some entity (a department, for instance), or an inequitable system. In doing so, we place ourselves in a certain amount of danger or risk, which might be physical, such as during an actual protest, and/or psychological, such as in everyday circumstances when we are advocating against a policy or on behalf of a colleague or student.



FIGURE 1. QR code for “Name It to Claim It” micropractice #1.

The brain processes danger or risk in the same way, regardless of the situation that alerts us to it, by cueing the nervous system to go into fight, flight, or freeze response in order to reach safety. As mentioned in a previous Genius Moves column (O’Donnell-Allen & Robbins, 2022), in scientific terms, this mode is known as the “sympathetic state” and is marked by physical sensations such as quickened breathing, muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, etc. When in this state, we may feel motivated to act, to retreat, or to stop trying and just give up. If danger is clear and present, injustice is acute, or stakes are inordinately high, any of these reactions may be warranted temporarily, but when risk is ever-present, if stress never lets up, or we experience social disconnection on a regular basis, we can move into a chronic sympathetic state. Our bodies then stew in a hormonal, biochemical concoction that interferes with our healthy systems, causing “dis-ease” by making us ill. This is why long-term health conditions like diabetes and heart disease are often linked to stress (Harvard Health Publishing, 2020).

Fortunately, we can intervene to help our bodies metabolize this harmful chemical soup through activities like working out, playing music, spending quality time with others, participating in creative tasks, and engaging in practices like meditation, yoga, and being in nature. Any healthy pursuit that helps us tap the brakes can bring our bodies back into a “para-sympathetic state” where our nervous systems can operate on a calmer, more even keel, as indicated by muscle relaxation, a steady heart rate, and regulated breathing. In this state, we are more likely to experience physical and emotional well-being and to form meaningful social connections. These conditions are essential to sustaining our advocacy work.

Admittedly, because advocacy necessitates opposition, it can sometimes be a tightrope walk, requiring us to navigate back and forth between a sympathetic and parasympathetic state, as the steps in Figure 2 depict.

So, if we are committed to advocacy work, how do we navigate the space between the two states? How do we keep fighting for the things we believe in and also sustain ourselves? We’ve developed another micro-practice called “Walking the Tightrope,” elaborating on Figure 2, with detailed guidelines.

GENIUS MOVE #3: Laugh

Yes, we’ve just talked about danger at length, and, yes, you heard us right: *Laugh*.

As teachers, we’re accustomed to rolling up our sleeves and getting to work, but let’s put the Protestant work ethic on hold for a hot second. If you are not given

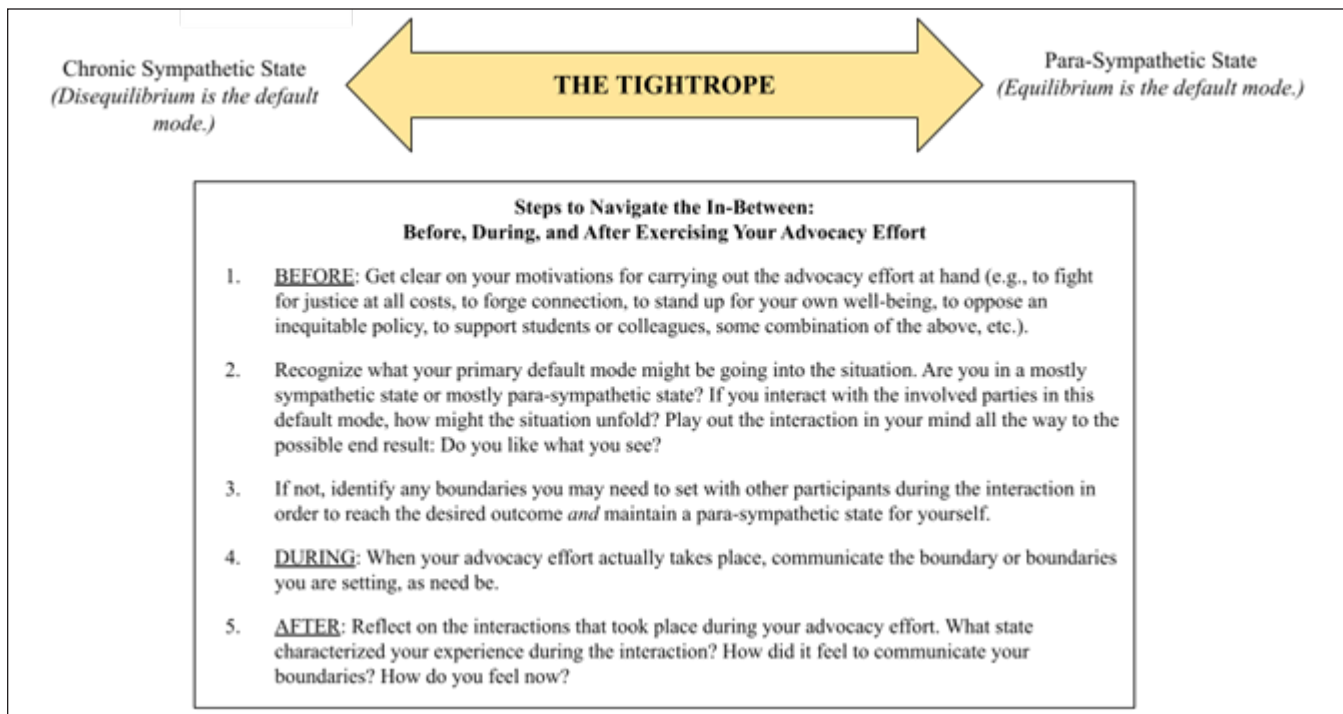


FIGURE 2. Steps for navigating between a sympathetic and para-sympathetic state.

to frivolity, consider that in her new book, *Unearthing Joy*, Gholdy Muhammad has added a fifth pursuit to her culturally and historically responsive education model, and that's *joy*, which she insists "is the ultimate goal of teaching and learning" (2023, p. 17). The act of "unearthing joy" requires that teachers help "students to uplift beauty, aesthetics, truth, ease, wonder, wellness, solutions to the problems of the work, and personal fulfillment" (p. 17).

The two following behaviors from the ST definition are especially relevant to this task:

- creating and protecting space for self-care, play, and joy; and
- modeling for all stakeholders, including our students, how to live and work sustainably.

Taken together, these ST behaviors beg the question: If we do not lead genius-level lives beyond our classroom—that is, lives that wed our own identity, skills, intellect, and criticality with *joy*—how can we model this for our students?

In summer 2019, we shared an experience that still serves as a touchstone. We were kicking off a yearlong



FIGURE 3. QR code for "Walking the Tightrope" micropractice #2.

institute for sustainable teaching (IST) for educators in Molly's district. It had been a traumatic year for the district, and as a result, the IST had been emotionally intense. At the end of an especially fraught day, the two of us retired to Molly's house to figure out how to shift gears.

We had just gotten to work when Molly's daughter, Maya, burst in and said, "You have to come with me *right now!*" Maya explained that on her drive home from work, she'd seen something weird when she drove by the nearby park. After pulling over to investigate, she'd discovered a pile of large squares of ice, each around eight inches thick, at the top of a steep hill. "There's been a summer camp going on there, and I think they were using them as sleds!"

Compelled by Maya's excitement, we grabbed a pile of beach towels and rushed to the park. Once there, we selected our own squares of ice, covered them with beach-towel "cushions," and began bobsledding down the hill. Despite numerous wipeouts, we trudged back up the hill over and over for another run. Exhausted by belly laughs, we returned to Molly's house, deferred our ST planning, and flopped onto her couch to watch recaps of the Tour de France.

The next morning, we took a cue from our previous night's experience and decided to scrap our afternoon plans for the IST, which had included, you guessed it, *lots of hard work*. Instead, we planned an afternoon that began with a raucous outdoor circle game called "Big



Picture of Denise Barry, a teacher participating in an outdoor game during the Institute for Sustainable Teaching.

Booty” (<https://tinyurl.com/49bpm4u4>) followed up with free time at “play stations” where participants could watercolor, write blackout poetry, create collages, or simply take a walk. The only rule was *no work*, and the reward wound up being a whole lot of joy. Everyone felt more inspired to deepen our understanding of ST on the subsequent day of the institute because our spirits felt well, *sustained*.

At the final IST meeting that following May, we asked participants to write about the impact of ST on their lives. We have no doubt that moments of joy like those described above prompted one participant to write, “Teaching is human work. Sustainable teaching grounds us firmly in our humanity so that we can serve the humanity in others.” This comment bears a striking resemblance to Ghody Muhammad’s observations that “[teaching] criticality humanizes instruction and makes it more compassionate” (2020, p. 117).

Though it sounds counterintuitive to take time out for joy when there are so many lessons to plan, papers to grade, and parents to call, remember that even soldiers are ordered to stand “at ease” once and a while. Thus, as your commanding ST officers, we give you permission to give *yourself* permission to laugh with friends till your belly aches, have a dance party in your car when you hit a stoplight, or stop long enough to look up at the sky. Your workload may not be transformed in the interim, but you will.

Cindy O’Donnell-Allen is a full professor in the English Department at Colorado State University, where she directs the CSU Writing Project and the Colorado State Sustainable Teaching and Learning (CSSTL) Collaborative. CSSTL unites educators and underrepresented high school students in researching the challenges and joys they experience in their schools and communities.

Molly Robbins teaches English Language Arts at Cherokee Trail High School in Aurora, CO, where she also directs the Cougar Resource Center for Peer-Tutoring and works with the staff to facilitate professional development. She is a Teacher Consultant for the Denver Writing Project.

We close this final column with the same admonition from Ghody Mohammad that we included in our first column: “We need teachers who are on the front lines modeling, guiding students, participating, and doing what we ask of students” (2020, p. 78). With this in mind, our final challenge to you is to continue developing your identity, sharpening your intellect, honing your skills, and growing in criticality with colleagues who teach for justice.

Oh, and don’t forget to sustain your teaching in the process. It’s the only way to truly get your genius on.

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