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## **Billowing Forth** by Christopher Knaus, Ph.D.

## "What one does not remember contains the key to one's tantrums or one's poise"

(In The Evidence of Things Not Seen, James Baldwin. pg. xii).

Our intent to raise solid, righteous-thinking children is not enough. It never is, and that is precisely why we sometimes fail.

Only after failing for years as a white maile teacher of African American studies and racism did I eventually realize that I had to live what I taught. I might have meant well, but the impact I was having was not changing my students. I was not pushing them as hard as they needed to be pushed to trigger personal transformation, and indeed, I realize now that my entire focus on shifting students attitudes and lifestyles was off — instead, I needed to focus on myself and living what I was teaching. I needed to reflect on what led me to be in front of classrooms that did not look like me. To reflect on how the anger I carry with me is there for a good reason: no one should be beat down, either physically, mentally or spiritually and have that beating live inside them as an integral part of their existence.

My intent as a teacher, scholar, son, and lover is not enough. No matter what I do, people across this world, across this country, across the street will be beat down. Wars will rage. Students will be failed by educational systems. Parents will be violent with their children. So how can I judge or assess my impact as an educator, my impact as a white person trying to shift societies ways of living and being?

Only after failing for years as a teacher, do I now see that I was trying to answer the wrong question. My intent is not the point, my impact is.

Listen. I've been silenced and beat down. And I choose to remember how, when, where, and why. I have been beat down by my family, by my teachers, by police officers, by mental health counselors, by neighbors, by peers, by random adults. I remember and I remember deeply so that I can live without beating down others

What do you remember? And how do you react to what you do not remember?

I intended to be different. I intended to teach about what I grew up seeing. And I failed because I based my actions on what I had been taught. I had been taught to ignore, to forget and to deny.

Today rage billows forth when I teach other white people about racism, when I confront people who have built up a world around them that only wants to make sense of OJ Simpson, 50 Cent,

pants sagging below knees, loud woofers shaking in Cadillacs rolling down imaginary urban streets. I ask white students to name positive black role models and they list "popular" black athletes and entertainers: Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Barry Bonds, Michael Vick, and within the past six months, Barak Obama. Yet, I ask black students and they say their parents, or grandparents, aunts and uncles and make little mention of televised stereotypical celebrities. Separating stereotypes from reality seems an impossibility in today's reality-show world, especially if there are only a few people of color visible on the screen. So white people build up a world around outselves that makes sense of what we see on the screen, and we ignore what we could learn from the real stories, the written struggles, the histories, the poetry and music of people of color.

Why? This 'sense making' is precisely what evokes my deepest moments of rage.

I mean, I've come to terms with white supremacy as global reality. Entertainment, television, internet, radio, anything popular is for the most part controlled and produced in order to "make" money, and the easiest, least creative way to achieve that goal is to promote new-age white male supremacy. This ideology perpetuates every negative stereotype about black and brown bodies. For example, the narrative of happy, goofy, cute, sexy or nappy, thuggish, violent whore. We get Halle Berry, Jada Pinket Smith, and Beyonce, or we get Lil' Kim in prison. We get, Eddie Murphy posing as an obese ignorant obsessed African American woman in Norbit, and Shirley Q. Liquor, a minstrel show caricature of a stereotypical welfare queen with 19 kids played by a black-faced white man. These are our options; these are the images we purchase. Few options exist outside these; most that do are discounted or "underground."

I have spent much of my life fighting these images. I have taught so that students recognize the folly of believing in such images of blackness. Only recently have I come to recognize that my intent in fighting such images is largely irrelevant. It is my impact that matters. How am I seen? How am I heard? How does what I remember help me stay true? I teach in African American Studies. I teach about racism. I teach black authors most of my students will never read otherwise. I teach in prisons, juvenile justice facilities, homeless shelters.

I learn from elders, I read books telling me that the great imperialistic steamroller does not flatten everyone everywhere. In short, I work my ass off so that I can sleep at night knowing I am

fighting the good fight. At least I am fighting, I assure myself.

What do you remember? And how do you react to what you do not remember?

I continue struggling with this rage. Its there when I wake up. Evoked by random white people who proclaim their ignorance, their denial as if they did not choose it. As if they do not choose to ignore the millions of counter stories contradicting their adherence to white supremacy. It's not only the actual genocide that enrages me; it's the blatant and total denial that genocide is going on across the street that stabs into my ulcer-riddled belly. I'm not sure you understand. The violence I lived, the too-painful-to-remember-but-can-never-forget childhoods with my father's daily tirades against me, against gays, against African Americans, Mexicans, Latinos, women – these tirades cemented in me the notion that we are all very connected.

No matter how prepared I seem to be for the trigger, almost every time I face the arrogance of ignorance, I rage.

"What do I call them anyhow? Black, African American, people of color? Its all so confusing."

It comes from deep within my belly. Hearing this arrogance because one has the choice to ignore.

"Why don't they speak English?"

My fists clench, my breathing quickens with intensity, my eyes pierce through those lips that speak unknown word-punches.

"Why are they so angry?"

Rage billows when I hear the words. They. Them. Those people. Words used to keep others as far from lips that curl slightly when the rest of this sentence is completed: I'm not racist, but....

I'm a ball of flame ready to burn my people down in a purging of rage so clean nothing will be left of the white skin we hold so dear. The rage at our denial of memory washes over my body. My fingers hurry together, curl into fists of history and beg for release. All I want to do is smash something, anything. And I remember. I remember taut, smoky skin, hands with hundreds of tiny cuts, scrapes, bruises from pulling huge pieces of lumber across conveyer belts hurtling towards me. His fist crushes my 11-year-old face. Again and again. I curl into the tiniest ball, the littlest being that cannot be found.

Does my father's intent to raise me well deter the impact of each punch, of all the bloody noses he gave me? I waft inside my rage, I think to my 7th grade math teacher, staring me dead-in-the-face, wondering aloud, shaming me; "when-oh-when I will pay attention to math problem #14?" I always get stuck here, comparing impossible transgressions: which was worse, the humiliation of dad's punches, or the humiliation of being shamed by teachers?

What do you remember? And how do you react to what you do not remember?

Such flashbacks are problematic when I am teaching undergraduate students. There is not supposed to be rage or emotion in the college classroom. We are supposed to learn control, supposed to learn to tighten our lips and seal our lives with academic pages, so there is no room, no risk, from our emotional boiling points. So I swallow. But they catch me by surprise. I spring

forth, childhood memories of molestation serving as a sword, my bow carries with it fatherly violence, my armor thickened from years of everyone around me ignoring the pain of growing up. I leap out, verbal assault ready to tear down the most strong-willed person.

Funny what we do with the word "ignore" – it seems a purposeful, disdainful way to deal with those we do not tolerate. We hide what impact our intent to ignore has when we say we/they are ignorant, and how dare they?

Yet somehow we develop "ignorance" when we are confronted by the children we have raised. Somehow we deny their realities and the realities we create for them. We label children "unadoptable." Do we really mean inadaptable, as in unable to be saved? I think of the corollary in education: uneducable children. Unable to be educated. The throw-away children. Should we be talking only about intent when we discuss people society has cast away?

Here is the moment of contradiction: we act out, we intend to change things. We state, stomping our feet down: "Enough is enough!" And we act, we do something that we believe will make a difference. We teach the un-educatable, adopt the unadoptable. That's the goal, right? Make a difference. "Just do it," Nike tells us. And somehow the act becomes a state of being. I become a person who acts simply because I think. So I buy Nikes, and I just do it. I recycle. I buy green. I am that sort of person. My intent becomes my action, and corporate America feeds us this complacency. You want to make a difference? Click on this link everyday and a starving child in Africa will be fed. "For just 25 cents a day, you too can make a difference." And our intent shields us, convinces us that we do really believe that the world must change. And so, we're constantly intending to do right. And somehow, through this constant intent we consciously ignore that we really are not living differently. Perhaps we only are more entrenched in believing in change. But change is not necessarily good or bad. It's just different.

My intent is not enough. I must remember and change. I must remember.

This world is dying. We are killing ourselves. Intending to live does not ensure life. And so I must have an impact. Upon whom becomes less relevant the more I believe I am this state-of-being just right. So I ignore so that I can deny. And in denying, I relive the past I ignore. We create the past we ignore. Our tantrums, our poise comes from some place, some set of disparate memories we can dismiss or address. Baldwin urged America to dive into our collective memories. What would the impact be if we were willing to acknowledge our memories, if we were sincere about revealing our deepest pain to one another?

It is this ignorance, this chosen denial from others of my childhood that strikes this rage into my heart. If I am denied, if what makes me cringe, or be shaken or recover is not allowed voice, how then will all people of color or women speak their experiences of life? If I do not give voice to my own overcoming, to clarify that I learned about racism because I grew up being beaten and found solace in people of color around me to whom such violence was foreign but who understood and helped based on their own intellectual and emotional and personal beat downs; how then will I offer solace to people of color looking to voice their living resistance and overcoming of the racism that plagues their lives with each breath?

What do you remember? And how do you react to what you do not remember?