

Radical Love in Moments of Disparities: A Letter To Students of Colour

By: Shyam Patel

As a teacher, I trace the experiences and stories of my students, hold them near to me, find them in the conchaves of our trenches, and let out a glister in the form of a tear. Almost grievingly, I wonder how to inspire these bodies and identities — ones who know pain and trauma all too well — when I still find myself drowning, suffocating in the vast bounties of whiteness — a culture of dominance that subjugates us all.

Drawn into this thought, then, I can only think about the politics of love. Not the artificial, commercialized, and monetized love that has come to consume us, but rather a radical notion of love — a love so profound that it shakes the foundation of our cores. It is a kind of love that we are not accustomed to because it has been taken away from us. If we explore and look closely, however, the semblance of that radical love remains with us; it lingers like a fainting memory. Thus, we are always searching, yearning for radical love and that comes with a territorial definition that evolves as we (re)shift ways of loving.

Through this thought, I share a poem that I have previously written about my grandmother:

my grandmother healed from the earth. she bathed us in warm water with neem leaves. she cured sore throats with honey and ginger. she sang lullabies — told us stories of our ancestors. the lyrics sealed open wounds, rested them gently in the meadow of our hearts. when we wept, she held our bodies in her arms. in her last moments, i wonder if she held us then too. i wonder if her love still carries within an endless track of soil or a river that runs into an ocean current. some days, when the quiet breeze passes, i can feel her hand fold into mine. i feel the caress of fingers, telling me the salt water of my tears is sacred. do not bury those tears. let them moisten the dry land. to heal, i cry. i let the pain and trauma heal through this ongoing ritual. somewhere, someplace nearby, i can see my grandmother crying with me. even now, she holds me like her own child, still teaching me the way of the earth.

This is radical love. It is complicated and simple at the same time because radical love is not singular. It navigates within differences and transcends those boundaries. For too long, however, this love has been unspoken; it has been communicated in makeshift mannerisms. This radical love that I speak of is not one that can be easily defined, partly because our imagination of it tethers on experiences and stories that have been ruptured by colonial legacies, many of which are still ongoing. We often lose radical love, given that the culture of dominance annihilates us, even when we do find some remnants of it. For me, I find it in memories of the homeland, in the food that warms me, in the sound of a rickshaw honking, and I can endlessly unwind myself in these folds.

(Un)knowingly, however, radical love dances in between slippage — a residue of an afterthought. This — a culmination of moments of disparities — occurs so frequently that we forget what it means to love and to be loved. Such a state of temporality consumes us when we experience violence in the name of white privilege and white supremacy. To this end, we bear a collective responsibility to hold each other and remind ourselves that we are possible. That — in the past and even now — our peoples are fighting for freedom — one that has been taken away from us.

As such, radical love is always on its on martyrdom, but what happens when it's feeling wholly disappears? Fortunately, I argue that such a thing is impossible. Radical love can

never be fully taken away from us. Can the stars be taken away from the moon? Does the soil not soften when it touches water? While we may be temporarily captivated and imprisoned, there is something within us — perhaps what we call the soul — that always reminds us that home is near, proximally in our hearts. In our close corners, then, this comes from the practice of developing, holding, and sometimes even letting go of relationships. Most of all, I think about bell hooks' *All About Love*, where she poignantly pinpoints *honesty* as the basis of love. She contends — quite wonderfully — that the heart of justice is truth telling.

As a teacher, then, I commit myself to be there for my students, particularly students of colour, to ensure that none of them ever fully lose this radical love. I want to know each of them. I want to listen to their experiences and stories. I want to be honest with them. I want to let them know the depths of radical love and (re)claim its fruits and labour. In my own experiences, however, love is hidden. It is there in acts, but we do not speak of it. To give words to love, to define it, we can embrace our students in an act of defiance — almost against colonialism and its guises. So, when I learn from and teach my students, especially my students of colour, I will do so with love.

In juxtaposition with this, radical love also reminds me to be alone and set boundaries. This is what the Western trope called “self-care” — a widely used term now. Through radical love, this self-care reverberates in basic human necessities like food and sleep, which capitalism denies us, so the most marginalized and stigmatized continue to starve and suffer. For those of us who have access to navigate this, we have to find ways to maintain this self-care. A diet that is in tune with our bodies, for example, should not be a one-off occurrence but rather a lifelong journey. Here, I follow the words of Thich Nhat Hanh in his work, *Reconciliation: hearing the inner child*. He says that each of us has an inner, suffering child, and we must nurture it. Until and unless we do, we cannot be liberated. To be a teacher, then, is to be a healer, as bell hooks has taught me.

I recently read somewhere — beautifully, exquisitely — suspended in such poetry — these words by Paul Brandt, “Don't tell me the sky's the limit when there are footprints on the moon.” When I look closely, I can see those footprints. Sometimes I can even see them moving, walking towards me, and when we meet, we will embrace each other with radical love.