

THE THINGS WE CARRY

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Abstract:

This article draws a parallel between my experience as a high school Math teacher and the narrative of O'Brien's classic, *The Things They Carried*. The internal conflicts, personal and philosophical dilemmas born from a controversial war are framed as metaphors for similar emotions born from the struggle of a black teacher teaching black students in a school system that does not serve them.

If I project the text of *The Things They Carried* onto that of my teaching career, I perceive the intersection of the two narratives in the parallel between O'Brien and his reluctant then resigned participation in the Vietnam War and the dilemmas and transformations of so many zealous Black teachers. Both sets of tales illuminate for me the sometimes indomitable power that a scripted, prescribed and/or compulsory role can have on one's behavior. A "role" often subverts and ultimately dismisses one's espoused attitudes, values and morals. A "role" often compels one to casually perform actions in direct contradiction to them. As Milgram's (1961) study—wherein participants delivered what they believed to be electric shocks to a "learner"—suggests, a role can even reveal how fragile our humanity is.

In my nearly ten years as a public school Math teacher, I observed first-hand many of my Black colleagues contribute to or perpetuate the very phenomena that they vocally railed against, like unfair punishment of boys of color, low expectations for Black students, culturally destructive pedagogy, and inappropriate relationships with students. Though the underlying rationale for their actions differed from the popular logic of White salvation or White antipathy that permeates public schools, the results of them were remarkably similar.

For example, I regularly listened to my Black comrades fiercely advocate for what I considered severely harsh disciplinary measures because "the world isn't going to tolerate that kind of behavior from them; they need to learn accountability now [before it's too late]." In other cases, I witnessed comrades with powerful and affirming messages to transmit to students transform themselves into preachers instead of instructional guides. When some students inevitably rejected their lecture-heavy pedagogy, these adults lashed out at or embarrassed them publicly for "not understanding the game," "being so brainwashed," or not "realizing what they're up against out there." In yet other examples, I witnessed my comrades dismiss students who performed poorly in their classes as "lost" or "just dumb" based mainly on the assumption that Black students should necessarily flourish in classrooms with Black teachers. Unfortunately, the idea that one's social location obviates effective and creative instruction has been evident in too many classrooms that I have seen.

I do not write about the men and women above with an ounce of scorn because I too made similar mistakes in my teaching tenure. I well understand the desperation, the deep frustration with the personal, political and socio-economic ecology in which schooling sits, the genuine pain and the deep-seated fear that lends to the behaviors above. I well understand that White and Asian teachers are not the only ones who damage Black students despite their best intentions. Our best intentions too are often tainted by anachronisms, myths, pathologies, prejudices, pride, and, yes, racism. Certainly mine were not immune.

It was my view then, and still is, that you don't make war without knowing why. Knowledge, of course, is always imperfect, but it seemed to me that when a nation goes to war it must have reasonable confidence in the justice and imperative of its cause. You can't fix your mistakes. (O'Brien, 2009, p. 39)

Despite this conviction, O'Brien went to Vietnam and fought young men that he did not know in a war that he "hated" and "seemed to [him] wrong" for political reasons that "were shrouded in uncertainty." He disobeyed his conscience in order to avoid incarceration and/or alienation and isolation from his family and community.

While I have not personally or professionally encountered a dilemma even a fraction of the weight of O'Brien's, being nearly compelled into a problematic role is an experience I can relate to. For the first two to three years of my teaching career I too often played the role of "Intimidator" or "Humiliator;" in part because of my own hubris and naiveté, but also because of the social and professional rewards from staff and students alike for being able to "keep kids in check." My colleagues, especially White ones, marveled at my ability to "get 'em to sit down and shut up". Many of the students liked the sense of order and authority that I brought to my classes—"Frederick don't play!"

I was very good at forging meaningful relationships with many, if not most, students, but my instructional prowess badly lagged behind that ability. My two roles were convenient interventions when my lessons failed to sufficiently engage or captivate all of the students in a classroom. I too often made sure that no one “got out of line” as opposed to making sure that I had mechanisms or set contexts for students at the margins to thrive.

Regrettably, I was perpetuating a paradigm that I sought to topple: driving Black students’ performances through antagonistic means; and blindly, hypocritically asking them to conform to a system that was not designed for their scholastic success. Further, my colleagues, students’ parents, and the students themselves had all bought into this paradigm to varying degrees, so I was not challenged to reflect on my actions enough. Further, my social location as a young Black man from the inner-city (blah blah blah) put me in prime position to rebuff quiet critics as unfamiliar or out-of-touch with what “really works for *our* kids.”

O’Brien’s torment of Jorgenson, the novice medic whose initial incompetence drew O’Brien’s ire, reminds me of how easy it is to get immersed in a role attached to a mission that one rejects prior. Once in the role, the thrill of the concomitant power can become addictive. Similarly, the social rewards of the role like camaraderie, a sense of belonging to an elite or exclusive group, or simple tribalism (“us versus them”) can numb or even separate one from the values that he held prior.

In my case, I harken back to the unnecessary and destructive confrontations that I had with some of my male students. I entered teaching primarily to serve as a role model for young men with similar backgrounds to myself, but somehow I landed in serious conflicts with a few. I regret each failed encounter to this day.

Of the four young men that I served most poorly, I know that one is in prison for armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. Another was accused of stabbing someone. I have not heard from or about the other two and can only hope that they have not made similar mistakes. On the other hand, I—who was charged with ensuring that they learned Mathematics adequately and charged myself with their learning more broadly about their identities, plights and resilience— have a big fancy job now. Something feels off about the present juxtaposition between us.

O’Brien’s devious prank is as much about his own feeling of alienation from his former squadron members as it is about revenge for being poorly attended to on the battlefield. His rational mind can grasp that a novice medic would panic under literal gunfire. The sense of being replaced by someone that he views skeptically is the bigger affront.

I recall one incident in particular where a young man walked through my room during lunch to get to another classroom. I was livid at what I perceived as his being rude and imperious. I yelled at him expecting him to apologize, but he did not cower. The young man did quite the opposite by cursing and gesticulating at me. The episode ended with a dear female colleague of mine pushing me away from him after gently goading him to leave. I verbally ascribed my outburst to his insouciance, but she correctly reprimanded me that I was responding to the death of a friend the weekend prior. I never should have been at work that day. Grief should have been my occupation on that date.

I soon regretted the incident, because weeks later I spotted the same young man in a hallway being threatened and cornered by three others. I attempted to use small talk to give him an opportunity to flee the situation, but he indignantly refused. I further asked him to quickly help me with some small task, but he refused even more forcefully the second time. At that point I realized that I had alienated someone for whom I could have made a difference... which was my purported point in having the job in the first place. What a disappointment.

He would have been taught that to defend the land was a man’s highest duty and highest privilege. He had accepted this. It was never open to question. Secretly, though, it also frightened him. He was not a fighter. His health was poor, his body small and frail. He liked books. He wanted someday to be a teacher of mathematics. (O’Brien, 2009, p. 119)

Action itself obfuscates the question—“Why?” In heated, tense or pressure-filled scenarios born from an assigned role, barely anyone knows the underlying rationale for certain behaviors. Instead he relies on “common sense,” which is usually the propaganda of the powerful. It is not until one recalls activities in hindsight that he can perceive the humanity of his former adversaries.

It took me about three years to figure out how to diffuse hostile situations with my male students without alienating them, unnecessarily belittling them, or losing my own vested power. It took me about five to preemptively decode students’ behaviors. It took me about six to grasp how I was being exploited by a system to unwittingly perpetuate norms and practices that have been destructive to my people. It took seven years and the birth of my own son to truly appreciate the complexities and vulnerabilities of the young men that I had tangled with. I can actually see them now; not their projections, *them*. Obviously, this

deepens my regret, but also my resolve to shape an ecology wherein some other novice (or veteran) Black teacher does not feel compelled to repeat my mistakes.

I get it. Though we know that the proverbial game is rigged, we ask and often coerce students to “just” play it in order to later become change agents. We ask them to conform immediately, so that hopefully they can strategically rebel later. The glaring issue is that ubiquitous requirement for our Black students is evidence that their Black teachers have not rebelled enough! We mask our failure to confront injustice by asking the students to play pretend until they can do what we have not. Our ignorance, our lack of an arsenal against the might of the mass schooling system, our ignorance about what to do should not be saddled to young people. Those are adult fights.

We know why we should make that war.

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