

Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures



Edited by
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2. Counters to despair

Sherri Spelic

When I proposed the title of this chapter, “Counters to despair”, I believed that I was choosing words carefully. In fact, they are borrowed from Catherine and Laura’s original call for chapters of #HE4Good. *Counters*, as in, *actions against a negative or encroaching force*, I thought. Nevertheless, I continued to picture “*a level surface (such as a table, shelf or display case) over which transactions are conducted or food is served or on which goods are displayed or work is conducted.*”¹ Kitchen, lunch, and display counters refused to leave my mind.

Here’s what I know: you needn’t work directly in the realm of post-secondary education to be worried about its future. You need not hold a PhD to recognise that higher education in many places remains deeply beholden to oppressive structures including (but not limited to) white supremacy, patriarchy, and unchecked neoliberalism. You and I, as citizens, as learners, as members of society, need not accept these threats to higher education as inevitable or insurmountable.

There are barriers between the futures we most dread and the current realities we inhabit. Let’s call them counters. What are they made of? How do we build them?

Which counters exist to separate us from despair? Over which counters must we negotiate conditions that prevent and/or alleviate despair? Which counters appear freshly constructed and which ones seem ancient and everlasting? What must we do to resist an understandable leaning toward despair?

1 Merriam-Webster, Incorporated. (2022). Counter. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counter>

I place these words, poems, and meditations on the counter before us. I pile these words between us and despair. Despair remains distinctly possible, tangible, and real. Even as we sit or stand at the counter, we can observe and contemplate despair without becoming it. How we do that will vary, as will the ways despair presents itself to us at different times. To counter despair requires that we acknowledge its existence, its reality. We can do that and still hold ourselves separate.

Choosing words feels easier than choosing a state of mind. And when we can, we choose anyway.

Give me hope, please.

It would be so nice to talk about what gives me hope. In fact, I would love for someone, *something* to come over here and give me some hope. “Look, here’s something you can feel good about. It might happen again. There’s hope!” Or “Hey, did you hear about this initiative, it’s going to be funded for another academic cycle! That’s something to make us hopeful, right?”

Just imagine if we could walk through our campuses, down the halls of our institutions exchanging bits of tangible hope with each other. Hope on a lanyard, hope in notebooks, hope in the library stacks, hope on cafeteria napkins, hope in coffee cups, hope as a marching band, hope on sports jerseys, t-shirts, and baseball caps, hope as an administrator, hope as a raise for custodial and cafeteria workers, hope in the all-gender bathrooms, hope as instructor equity. Imagine all those sources and outlets for hope!

Picture this: hope circulating back and forth, round and round! We can feel it, right? I mean, hope in abundance generates its own wild energy. It’s like you can smell it in your morning coffee. It’s practically rising off your device as you compose that affirming email. People are talking about the mood, the vibe — all this hope in the air, on the ground — showing up like a flash mob in the most unlikely places: in the mental health centre, in the IT department meeting, in the provost’s and registrar’s offices. Unbidden, hope just strides in, inserts itself seamlessly into the conversation as if it had been there all along. And that’s the thing, hope seems to have arrived and spread, just like that!

You know, however, that’s not how this story works.

Hope is/was around because some folks are/were about the business of growing and cultivating it. Not focused on scaling up and turning a profit, we're talking about folks shaping hope for themselves and their loved ones, for friends and close colleagues. We're not talking about a perpetually renewable resource either. It's quite possible to run out of hope, to have your hope snatched away in broad daylight. So, if you're in the habit of cultivating hope, you learn to hold it close, to protect it. You don't skip around tossing it to anyone you meet. That said, it's not beyond you or me to build our own pockets of hope to draw from. You know, start small and keep going. Apply where necessary, share some where you can. Pooling hope can open fresh perspectives. Won't know until you try it. Sure, not every plan is going to work, but give your hope some practice and it gets stronger, more robust: also more savvy. Bear in mind that homegrown hope is not a superhero, it doesn't swoop, fly, or rescue. It's strategy and compassion; brass tacks and long-range vision; stubborn support and healthy resistance. Hope is a teacher who is still curious.

Hard is

What's hard is
 what's hard is reaching an understanding. We say
 r e a c h an understanding like walking over a bridge,
 a bridge over troubled water, perhaps,
 to reach an understanding.
 But the bridge
 collapses
 right under our feet.
 We are no longer standing
 we can no longer reach
 we have fallen down
 and that's what's hard.

What's hard about people
 What's hard about people is trying to
 understand them.
 What's hard about people is trying to understand
 why on god's green earth
 they are not more like us.
 What's hard about people is trying to understand
 why in the world
 we can't be more like them.
 What's hard about people is trying to understand
 why on god's green earth
 it's so damn difficult to be a person.

What's hard about knowing
 What's hard about knowing is realising
 It's not the same, it's not enough
 To change outcomes, attitudes, the climate
 Or even the premise of survival
 Because... power
 What's hard about knowing is that power
 Does not care what you feel
 Holds no interest in your growth
 What's hard is we say knowledge is power
 When we mean
 That we wish it were so.
 Wishing is easy and knowing, insufficient.
 That's what's hard.

Alysa chooses to PhD²

Motivations?

Program focused on my area of study: social justice in education
Needed space to deepen my thinking
Most drawn to programs where my professors
Were doing more community centred action research
Going where I hoped to feel more supported
In radical dreaming

Thoughts on #HigherEd then and now?

Saw it as elitist actually; worried about how I would navigate it.
Aspects of the system that seem like a pyramid scheme
Ha!

I've really had to sit with how two truths can coexist:
Several things that maintain academia as exclusionary and
I can also pursue big questions; embrace an iterative ongoing
process.
I'm here and also hope to work against the parts that cause harm.

Future of #HigherEd and potential for liberatory ed?

Actively still navigating my role, wondering how I will make it out
On the other side
Feel most hopeful when researchers challenge
The researcher/researched binary structure which
Positions the researcher as "expert" or "discoverer" of knowledge
— Can be incredibly colonising;
also positions participants as somehow less knowledgeable.
I see potential to work collaboratively with communities in
authentic ways
where we really use these spaces to challenge and change power
structures —
the glorification of the written word is heavy in higher ed.
I see potential for liberatory ed, when a more arts driven approach
is accepted.

2 Based on an email interview with Alysa Perreras, Inclusion, Justice and Antiracist Consultant and Researcher, Bogota, Colombia; Doctoral Student, Education for Social Justice, University of San Diego.

Never done, always beginning³

What I'm learning, what I'm seeing is that
 Just one thing
 Is hardly a thing
 Because it cannot serve
 All of our needs today
 Or tomorrow

Just one thing
 Is hardly a thing
 Because we need more tools
 For many tasks
 Both seen and unseen

If I try to build something
 I hope my students will want

It doesn't mean that they
 should never learn to struggle

It doesn't mean that they
 should never learn to protest

It doesn't mean that their
 wants won't change shape or direction

If I try to build something
 I hope my students will want

It means I'm striving to
 champion their independence

It means I'm striving to
 help them choose wisely

It means I'm striving to
 let go of my need to control the outcome

If my students and I build something
 we find useful

If my students and I build anything at all

3 "Never done, always beginning" is the final poem in my keynote for the OTESSA Conference, May 16–19, 2022. <https://edifiedlistener.blog/2022/05/17/hide-and-see-on-kids-power-and-resistance-in-education-otessa-22-keynote/>

we must build imaginations

If my students and I build
a city of care

a province of justice
a nation of acceptance

We are never done
and always beginning.

Assessment

We laugh to keep from crying. We laugh again.

The dream revisited

Once upon a time, I was able to dream.

I said,⁴

“In my dreams my children and grandchildren will not go to college; they will give birth to one.”

I wonder now if I still mean it.

In my dreams my children and grandchildren will remain voracious learners, willing to share their curiosity and expertise generously and wholeheartedly.

In my dreams my children and grandchildren will recognise both a need to help and be helped; to build in community and develop a healthy capacity for solitude.

In my dreams my children and grandchildren will know love — how to give and receive it, how to spread and apply it, how to celebrate and rekindle it, how to mourn its loss and nurture its beginnings.

In my dreams my children and grandchildren understand freedom and responsibility and the tensions these produce; they can recognise themselves in society and its making.

In my dreams my children and grandchildren may or may not go to college.

In my dreams my children and grandchildren give birth to a fresh understanding.

In my dreams my children and grandchildren and their grandchildren have vision that extends beyond the known; imaginations that stretch the universe. They blossom with promise.

Still I dream.

4 “How Much Higher, Education?
<https://edifiedlistener.medium.com/how-much-higher-education-653b6b5707c7>