

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

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Over the past five years, my work as a professor has moved away from traditional law teaching in the classroom to contemplating and learning about normativity in the context of university administration. Five years ago, I became an associate provost charged with equity and academic policies at my university. Through this work, I have the privilege of engaging with issues I care about with students and colleagues who are both passionate and smart. But many of these issues are divisive and fraught, lend themselves to no easy answers, and can recall incredibly personal and painful experiences among those affected. Conflict – whether between individuals, interest groups, or ideologies – is common. In my efforts to negotiate it, I have found it helpful to draw on my experiences as a law teacher wherein I have learned that the path toward resolution is both more complex and more promising if we are willing to interrogate how norms evolve and shift over time, the inherent frailties and imperfections of the human condition, the distinct contribution of process to results, and the objectivity of concepts like “justice” and “fairness”. Relatedly, as jurists, we deploy contextual analysis of past conflicts and decisions that have engendered harm and loss to imagine and implement measures that aim to heal, repair, and restore with a view to moving forward.

While these lessons and principles tacitly drive much of my work – both as a teacher and administrator – they were thrown into sharp relief for me during the COVID-19 pandemic. This occurred, in particular, through some interactions I had with my children as we spent much more time together in closed quarters, working and learning from our home. One interaction in particular stands out as a key lesson for me as a jurist, teacher, and university administrator about how we might look back and look forward at difficult watershed moments in a manner that instills humility and hope.

Once Montreal’s public schools resumed learning activities during the COVID-19 confinement, my 12-year-old son’s seventh grade teacher took

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to assigning her students important works of North American literature. In our discussions about these readings, I invited my preteen to think about how they connected to life for young people today, especially during this period of global crisis. These discussions became especially challenging as our current social context called upon all of us to think beyond the pandemic to issues of systemic racism. The swell of activism around #BlackLivesMatter has been powerful, moving, and inspiring. It also has prompted anxiety: What if real change does not come this time? As non-racialized people, how complicit are we and have we been? As many traditionally lauded symbols of western history are dismantled, how can we earnestly and honestly engage with stories of the past as we try to move forward?

These are incredibly tough questions. My own “tween” – who is just on the cusp of adolescence and slowly loosening his grip on an idealized understanding of the world – grappled with them at the same time as many of us. I did not have ready answers for him. Yet I was grateful to Robert Frost and Langston Hughes for facilitating our conversations, and for providing critical insights to my own work as a law teacher and university administrator charged with oversight of equity and academic policies in my home institution.

Two of the most beautiful pieces my son’s English teacher assigned her students last spring were Robert Frost’s poem, *The Road Not Taken* and Langston Hughes’ short story, *Thank You, Ma’am*. At first blush, these two works appear to have little in common except that both were written by American authors whose lives overlapped in time (although Frost was older and lived longer: he was born and died in 1874 and 1963 respectively, whereas Hughes lived 1902 to 1967). Frost was white and Hughes was Black. Frost’s work is marked by a focus on rural Americana whereas Hughes’ foregrounds African-Americans’ resilience and strength in the advancement of civil rights largely in urban centres, mostly New York, especially Harlem.

While seemingly distinct, Frost and Hughes’ works help us – especially those of us interested in working through complex social questions with young people – answer two key questions about humanity and human relationships. The first is “What and how do we remember?” The second, is “How do we keep going after we are hurt?”. *The Road Not Taken* provides

us with insight about the first, retrospective question and *Thank You, Ma'am* about the second, which is forward-looking.

The protagonist in *The Road Not Taken*, a hiker in the woods, is forced to choose a way forward when he reaches a fork in his path. He takes a while to make up his mind about which road to take (“long I stood”), ultimately realizing that, in fact, both paths have equally been worn by prior hikers. Just the same, he realizes that, later on when he recounts this moment, he’ll tell a tale of having elected for “the road not taken”, which actually did not exist except in the story that his future self will tell.

Frost is brutally frank about how we tell stories about the past; his poem forces us to recognize the mythical elements of the histories we recount. Actual historical facts can be mundane or even maligning. So, our narratives about the past tend to celebrate and glorify. Frost does not indict the storyteller, though. He suggests instead that there is something innately human about wanting to valorize the past.

Understanding our social propensity to “tell stories” rather than “recount historic truths” can be helpful to conversations about present realities with children. We are watching – some of us with turbulent emotions and thoughts – the denouncement and dismantling of icons long known to have participated in harmful practices. Seeing this, young people might ask: “Why did those statues get put up in the first place?” Mine did. It’s a fair question and Frost helped me answer it. When we look back, we tell our best stories using a lens of courage and wisdom. This can help us explain and celebrate the present. Our stories about the past might not be perfectly accurate or honest. Sometimes they tell us more about today than yesterday.

Frost’s poem thus provides important insights for thinking about how we remember, understand, and recount the past. Yet perhaps an even tougher question is about how we look forward, specifically following conflict. Hughes’ *Thank You, Ma'am* suggests an answer.

This short story, published in 1958, begins with a late-night mugging attempt by one young and clumsy Roger of Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. Washington Jones is a “large woman with a large purse” whereas Roger is “frail and willow wild”. Not surprisingly, the encounter ends badly for the latter. He tumbles to the ground before he can run away with

Washington Jones' pocketbook. She delivers a swift kick to his backside then pulls him upright, giving him a good shake "until his teeth rattled", and instructing him to square with her: "What did you want to do it for?" When he replies that he didn't "aim to," the woman calls him out as untruthful ("You a lie!"). Yet she knows his motivation without having heard it.

Mrs. Washington Jones' tough façade fades over the balance of the story. She forces Roger to accompany her to her rooming house where she instructs him to wash his face and provides him with a clean towel, supper, and conversation. Throughout, she makes a point of showing trust in the teen – turning her back to him as she prepares dinner with her purse unattended and the front door left wide open. Roger seems well aware and is careful to avoid a misstep. Ultimately the late-night ends with Mrs. Washington Jones giving Roger ten dollars for new shoes, bidding the adolescent good night while signaling her "wish" that he behave himself going forward, and Roger wanting, but unable, to reply with a "Thank you, Ma'am."

Langston Hughes' story is marked by time and place, and by features of identity tied to race and class. Yet every reader, especially a young reader, draws something special from this story of incredible generosity, compassion and empathy. Why do we harm others, and how do we look forward after we are harmed? These two questions at the core of *Thank you, Ma'am* anchor some of the most important conversations we have with children.

Hughes reminds us that each of us has the capacity to inflict harm. 'Offenders' will not all be as sympathetic or even as innocent as Roger. Still, Hughes' point is about the transformative power of accepting responsibility and gestures of grace even from those whom we've hurt.

Simultaneously, in Mrs. Washington Jones, Hughes personifies the process of reconciliation. Upon being accosted by a would-be thief, the woman exhibits anger ("kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter") and reclaims what is hers ("Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."). Her fury is unleashed through a series of questions: "Now, ain't you ashamed of yourself?" "What did you want to do it for?" "If I turn you loose, will you run?" Finally, she warns that repairing harm requires time

and work: “[y]ou put yourself in contact with me...If you think that that contact is not going to last a while, you got another thing coming.”

Then, the story pivots. Mrs. Washington Jones’ outrage recedes and is overtaken by engagement. Through dialogue, Mrs. Washington Jones at once humanizes Roger and compels him to see her own humanity – where and how she lives, and the parallels in their life trajectories. This engagement does not last long – one evening – but there is depth and dignity to it in that, Roger must listen to and learn from Mrs. Washington Jones who, throughout, takes steps to show her confidence and the promise she sees in him to know and do better.

In setting all of this out I do not suggest that the conflicts and dilemmas central to *The Road Not Taken* and *Thank You, Ma’am* – whether in nature or scope – track the challenges of confronting systemic race-based discrimination and violence. It is also an oversimplification to position Robert Frost and Langston Hughes as furnishing solutions to current social strife we are living, which call for discussion with young people including our own children and students. Just the same, these two beautiful works of literature give us something to anchor our thoughts and conversations about our past and about how we can move forward. If we understand, as Frost did, that we look back in a flawed and imperfect way, we can appreciate the importance of the current call to remember and recount with a sharper commitment to humility, humanity, and honesty. And, if we consider the promise, illustrated by Hughes, of learning through the extension and acceptance of grace and through engagement in relationship and dialogue, the hope of reconciliation with an eye to the future becomes apparent.