

Eric Ritter
July 16th, 2023

There's no clean way for me to articulate my thoughts about this week in the time I have left to write this or even a thesis I'm confident that I fully understand or believe. Every day has been a test of my fundamental beliefs about how to affect positive change in my work and personal life. I hope that it will become more clear as I write, but I make no promises. At the very least I can make it more vivid. I think it's best to start from the end and work backwards, but I once again make no promises to remain faithful to that structure...

One of my emergent mantras from my first 5 years of teaching is "feelings come first." Particularly with K-5 children, there is no learning without first considering the feelings that your lesson could evoke and, more importantly, the feelings of your students when they enter through the classroom door. Finding that sympathetic vibration between the child's feelings and the content is the key. I felt that Justin Kreuger understood this clearly when he asked us, "What is the goal of public commemoration?" I believe it's any attempt to capture the essential emotions in those important historical stories for when the original story tellers are no longer around to tell them themselves. That theme of commemoration provided a through-line for me to process this week. Those core emotions of grief, fear, gratitude, shame, and anger are universal, whether you're on the "right" or "wrong" side of history. It has to be this shared human experience that heals our divisions, leads to understanding, and generates solutions.

This process can be fast, but more often than not it is slow. We might take steps back for years before taking steps forward again. Institutions have a lot of inertia, but they are made up of people, who I believe are capable of change through that fundamental commonality of feeling.

When I think about effective commemoration I think first and foremost about the story-tellers. Those elders who experienced deep, visceral, life-threatening racism, both institutional and interpersonal, are our most precious and fleeting resource in the fight for justice. Mayor Johnny B. Thomas, Reverend Wheeler Parker, Dr. Eulah Peterson, Charles McLaurin, Maggie Daily and Lula Orsby - I have the deepest gratitude for being given the opportunity to listen to and speak with these heroes. Nothing else could compare to the effect that their words had on me. In each of their stories I felt the whole range of those commemorative emotions. There is no substitute.

I would never claim to really understand how they felt. Like Bill Abel said about the blues, If I sang the real blues I'd be crying, you'd be crying, we'd all be crying and couldn't do anything. This is true of any two people. We can only imagine a shadow of what goes on in the heart and mind of any other person, but when it comes to some experiences, like racism, sexism, anti-semitism, We in the progressive community, or maybe just in my personal circles anecdotally, often say things along the lines of I could never understand the experience of being black in america. That even comparing my experience is disrespectful. There is truth to that, but

I don't think it's the whole truth, and furthermore, I think it might do us a disservice. It's a dead end as I see it.

I felt it when Mr. McLaurin told the story of his brush with death. He was put in an impossible situation. A situation that no human being should ever have to go through. He was forced to dehumanize himself. He was told to hide his literacy by not writing anything down. He was given impossible orders by those in power - to answer the phone or note - which would damn him either way. His bodily autonomy was taken from him, and his life threatened. He was beaten for refusing to dehumanize himself with the words of his oppressors. Now my life has never been threatened. I've never been afraid to write. But some things I can imagine. I've felt things deeply through my struggles with mental health. I understand what it's like to have a voice in the back of my head that says lazy is who you are, that you're not doing anything with your life and no one would miss you when you're gone. And can imagine, maybe not fathom the depth of it, but I can imagine what it would be like if someone were forcing me to believe those things about myself. I may not be able to fathom the depth of it, but I can imagine it. I can go to that place and think to myself, "my god, what if the whole world around me wanted me to believe that about myself?" Would I be brave enough to say no if my life depended on it? That I cannot know. I can get as close as I can and let the story-teller show me what lies beyond my understanding, what's beyond the cliff when my train runs out of track. That exercise is important and I wouldn't really change if I didn't at least try to relate using my own experiences.

It's at that precipice where Charles became a hero to me, because in that moment, when he could have seen these white people as monsters, he looked into their eyes and saw fear. He saw their humanity in spite of their monstrous anger. Charles pulled no punches in describing their evil actions, but he and all of the other heroes we heard from this week refused to believe that the people themselves were evil beyond hope. It's that bravery, above all, that I will strive to practice for the rest of my life. With just an ounce of that courage in each one of us I have no doubt that we could begin healing, understanding, and working together to change the inertia of our institutions and our mindsets. We have more in common than we are allowing today, and to dismiss or give up on those we disagree with is not brave.

I do believe that things will and have gotten better, not for every individual, and not even for every community like the schools of Tallahatchie, but as a people. We need to listen to these story-tellers now, and we must ask them questions. We must seek out their stories, some of which are just now being told, and some of which are still yet to be discovered. We have a duty to learn all we can from those who fought the hardest battles and apply their principles to our problems today or we damn ourselves to learning those lessons again the hard way.

So what does this mean for my K-5 elementary school music curriculum... I'm embarrassed to have only mentioned the blues once in this rambling so far considering that was my stated focus when I wrote my application at the outset. I did learn about many more artists and repertoire that I can put in my curriculum. I learned about the founders getting fleeced because many couldn't read the contract or otherwise had no power to negotiate. I learned that Dockery's incremental change in wages made just a sliver enough difference to make space for

the music to spark. That's all useful background, but I learned something more important than all that. I got to interview three blues musicians while I was in the Delta and I asked them all the same question: What does a 5th grader need to know about the blues? The answer was pretty much all the same and it came in two parts. First, the blues is about feeling. Second, know your history. In that order. Every time. Musicians are notoriously terse in my experience, and sometimes vague, but that's the nature of music itself I suppose.

I had a professor in college who taught a course on Bob Dylan's lyrics, and he said something at the outset that has stuck with me. He warned us that if you start analyzing a song or poem by talking about the biography of the artist, you're probably doing it wrong. The feelings come first. The music comes first. If it's a good song, like a good lesson, it should make you vibrate sympathetically. At its core it's a story, but the story doesn't have to be real. It's imagined. Whether it's based on a true story, an embellished one, or a totally fabricated one doesn't matter. The truth is in the feeling and the personal introspection that it inspires. We all share the same human brains with the same set of brain chemicals controlling our emotions. I don't think the blues is about protest or oppression or even hope. It's just about how you feel. We need to study the originals because what they were feeling was so intense, and we need to know our history so that we can understand why those feelings were so profound.

One of my favorite songs from that class was "Song to Woody." I listened to it on my drive back up to Memphis before I listened to some Charlie Patton, Lead Belly, Muddy Waters, and B.B. King. You can listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOWfCVQBixs>