

# **Wrestling the Race-Monster**

**Addressing Stereotypes, Biases, and Misgivings in School**

**Mary Hannah Sanders**

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**Dr. Tom Romano**

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## **A Letter of Advice**

*Dear Future Teacher and Nurturer of the Children of the United States of America,*

All names are pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality and privacy of each respected individual.

*I had a dream. Over fifty years ago, I told my dream to the American people. I had a dream of freedom. I had a dream that little black boys and girls would be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls. I dreamed that they might learn together in school; that they might skip rope and play kickball together in the schoolyard; that they might grow together, overcoming the prejudices of their forefathers.*

*One hundred and fifty years after the abolition of slavery, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred and fifty years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred and fifty years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.*

*In American education today, you will witness that diversity still ceases to exist in many schools. You will witness the learning disparity between the wealthy suburban schools and the poor inner-city schools. You will see how history still repeats itself in the injustices that occur against these innocent little ones.*

*Take heed, Educator, and take heart. Do not let your heart be weary, but do all that is within your power to help those who cannot help themselves. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.*

*Be exceptional, Educator.*

*Sincerely,  
Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior*

### **I-identity Check: Day One, 7:30 A.M., before school starts**

*I am a confident, competent college student who will soon be a confident, competent teacher. I care about kids and I care about their mastery of*

[Type text]

*language. I don't care that I am one of the few white people walking down the hallways to get to class.*

## **Connecting the dots**

**Ms. A's Language Arts Class, October 25, 2011**

Ms. A (speaking to a student): You see this right here? This freckle? If you connect all the freckles on me, then we are the same color.

## **I-identity Check: Day One, 8:30 A.M.**

*I am one of four white people in this classroom. Only one student in this classroom is white. This is a new, foreign, and somewhat uncomfortable experience. Never before have I felt so much like a minority.*

## **Working Out the Kinks**

**Ms. A's Language Arts Class, October 26, 2011**

**Excerpt from *Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon M. Draper:**

“Anyway, the first day I saw him, he was pickin’ his hair out with his red pick with diamond lookin’ things on it. I went over to him, and said, ‘Won’t yo’ mama get mad when she finds out you took her pick?’ He slowly put the pick back in his pocket, slowly looked at me, and then proceeded to beat the snot out of me.”

**Excerpt from discussion of *Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon M. Draper:**

“Excuse me, Ms. A? What does this passage mean? What is ‘pickin’ his hair out?’” asked Kara.

“Well, sometimes people use hair combs, called ‘picks,’ to fluff up their hair and make their hair big. It is less common now, but it used to be a really big fad with African Americans, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. That’s why you call big hair an ‘afro.’”

Joe responded, “Well, just because he’s picking his hair out doesn’t mean that he’s black.”

“But the characters use slang too,” Devin chimed in, “that could mean that they’re black.”

“Yes, both of these details could help us to support an argument that Draper is writing about two African American men. But she never directly says if they are African American or not. I think that this is important, because it helps us to remember not to make assumptions about people based on race. If Draper told us the race of each character, do you think that we might make assumptions about who those characters are, what they feel, how they act, how they dress because of their race?” Ms. A asked.

The students nodded their heads in agreement.

[Type text]

## **I-identity Check: Day Two, 10 A.M.**

*The kids are so unruly and wild today. Ms. A is having trouble keeping them under control. I am trying not to have assumptions and apply stereotypes to the students on the basis of their current behavior.*

*I am a 5'2" white female. How can they respect me? I command no authority with my stature. I am a female which means that the students see me more as a disciplinary and motherly figure, according to Ms. A, and the students may be slow to respect me because of that.*

*Will I really be able to handle days like this in the future? Can I handle an urban school district? ? I am nothing like Ms. A.*

## **I-identity Check: Day Three, 9:30 A.M.**

*Today I am practicing my classroom management skills. It's amazing how intimidating just looking over someone's shoulder can be. The kids jump right back on task once I hover near them. Despite my anxieties, the kids do really seem to respect me. I am feeling like a teacher today.*

## **Break it Down**

### **Mrs. R's Remedial Reading Class, During Ms. A's Planning Period, October 26, 2011**

"Okay, kids. We are doing word study again today. Today we are reviewing the letter "o" in one-syllable words. You remember the rules for short o and long o in a one-syllable word that doesn't have any other vowels in the word?" said Mrs. R as she began her remedial reading class.

Micah, loud enough to be heard but not loud enough to warrant a comment from the teacher, fumed, "Man. I feel like I am in special education class."

But today is not the day to discuss "u" words—like "unjust" and "underachievement" and "underprivileged" and "unsupported" and "unhappy."

His frustration is lost amidst a monotonous chorus of ohhhhs and awwwws.

## **Racism**

**written by students Katie, Rob, and Jim October 31, 2011**

I judge off skin because  
I'm scared to be in my own  
The feeling they feel are  
Loud and known

[Type text]

The pain and negativity rushing  
Like a running faucet.

The harsh words and derogatory  
Feelings makes us  
Feel out of pocket.

Hate like pollution like  
Bad noise to the solution

Black and white, is  
That all we came to  
What about the true  
Meaning of me and you

Racism, speaking loud to  
Our minds. Saying being  
White is all fine and dine

We will all come together  
It will just take time.

### **I-identity Check: Day Five, 10:15 A.M.**

*While the students were writing, one of the girls asked me if she was allowed to write about a topic that was definitely not school-appropriate, although it was personal, applicable to the prompt, and something that was on her mind. “You should probably choose a new topic that is appropriate for school” was all I could say. I had no idea what else I should do—sometimes I feel like the culture of the students in the class is completely different than my own when I was growing up.*

### **All Children Are Angels**

#### **An Over-heard Conversation Between Teacher and Student**

**Ms. A:** Angels! Let’s get to work! We have a lot of tasks we need to accomplish today in class.

**Darnell:** I ain’t an angel, Ms. A.

**Ms. A:** All of my students are angels. Everybody is an angel.

### **I-identity Check: Day 7, 8:30 A.M.**

*Today I teach my first lesson to the students. I feel like I know them. I call each of them by name to answer my questions. I know which students need my encouragement to learn and to do their schoolwork. It is about more than just teaching now, it is personal. It is about them.*

[Type text]

## **Red and Yellow, Black and White**

I come from a long line of children of God.

I come from Adam.

I come from Noah, and Abraham, and Moses.

I come from the spicy Middle-East, and sultry Africa.

I come from Ireland and I sat at Arthur's table.

I come from the William Wallace's legion, a mere foot soldier for independence.

I come from the tribe that marched with Crowfoot from the plains to the wintery Canadian reservation, abandoning my home for peace.

I come from all four corners of the Earth.

My history is like a multicolored metamorphic rock, ever undergoing change.

## **I-identity Check: Day 10, 11 A.M.**

*I have graded, I have taught, I have interacted with students, I have managed classrooms, I have taught reading strategies, I have taught writing poetry. I feel like a teacher now more than ever. I do not want to leave, but my time here is up. These students have taught me more than I could ever have taught them in a two-week time span.*



Mural above Ms. A's doorway, painted by a former student

## End Notes

### **A Letter of Advice (Page 1)**

As I thought about the discrimination and segregation that are still prevalent in our society today because of race, I was reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior's *I Have a Dream* speech. I envisioned him giving me advice as I pursue a career in education and use the space of the classroom to educate students on the disparities of our society. I envisioned him writing me a letter that I could keep in my pocket and pull out whenever I needed encouragement or advice. Sections of the letter are direct quotes from his *I Have a Dream* speech.

### **I-identity Checks (repetend)**

The I-identity Checks are notes and reflections from my Researcher's Notebook. They describe my feelings and insecurities about race and about being a white teacher to black students. As I went throughout the course of the two-week field experience, I grappled with my

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identity as a white female in a school where the student population was mainly African American. These notes and reflections show my progression from discomfort and insecurity to enjoyment and confidence.

### **Connecting the Dots (Page 3)**

Skin-color is only the result of the genetic allotment of melanin. I often overheard my host teacher discussing her “whiteness”, and in this particular overheard conversation, she proved to the student that she also had “blackness” in the presence of freckles. Race was a huge topic of discussion in this language arts classroom, and Ms. A was not afraid to discuss it. Ms. A made sure to let her students know that beneath the physical appearance of each person, all humans are the same. She showed me that race is not something to sweep under the carpet, but something to address in order to eliminate misconceptions and injustices.

### **Working Out the Kinks (Page 3)**

Every moment in school can be used as a learning opportunity. Ms. A seized the opportunity to point out how an author uses details or the absence of details for characterization. Simultaneously, she seized the opportunity to point out how appearances so often dominate our conceptions of others. Ms. A’s lessons never failed to teach students both about literature and about themselves. She helped to untangle the twisted knots of bias that the students had absorbed from society.

### **Break It Down (Page 3-4)**

Mrs. R allowed me to observe her class while my teacher was having her planning period during one of my first mornings of the field experience. She taught remedial reading to seventh and eighth grade students. The students had the lowest levels of confidence I have ever witnessed. I felt overwhelmed watching them, growing angry that they had been allowed to scrape by in their elementary and early middle school years. Why were these students reading at such a low grade level? How had they even been passed on to the next grade level? When Micah made his comment about special education, it was difficult for me to maintain my composure. Such negligence for the education of these children should never have been allowed.

### **Racism (Page 4)**

*Racism* is a poem written by three of Ms. A’s students, in the style of Ruth Gendler’s poems in the book *The Book of Qualities*. During one class period, I had the students break up into groups and try their hands at writing poetry with figurative language. While many of the other poetry groups came up with silly similes and far-fetched personifications, this group cut to the core in their poem. The poem shows just how much these students have to say about racism and injustice. This poem was the best and most sincere poem written in both class blocks.

### **All Children Are Angels (Page 5)**

Ms. A was constantly calling her students “angels.” This nickname for her students held a great deal of power. Her students knew that they were loved. Her students knew that she held high expectations for them. Her students knew that, no matter what, they would not fall from her



grace. Ms. A treated her students with dignity, respect, and love, and it was astounding to witness the response that a mere word could conjure.

### **Red and Yellow, Black and White (Page 5)**

While thinking about my own race, I became frustrated that many people only see me as “white.” My skin color conceals the complex ancestry that I have. I became annoyed and began to write a poem that expresses some of my ancestral ties; I am Irish, English, Scottish, Blackfoot Native American, and ultimately a daughter of Adam. My skin cannot tell you this, but if you go beyond your preconceptions of me and get to know me, you will learn that I am more than what I appear to be. After writing this poem, I know that the students I worked with must get really frustrated with the stereotypes and first-impressions that others place upon them.

### **Jimi Hendrix Mural (Page 6)**

This amazing mural was painted above Ms. A’s classroom door. She described it as the favorite mural for the majority of her students throughout the years. Not only does it look amazing, but the quote painted alongside Jimi’s face is inspirational. “When the power of love overcomes the love of power... the world will know peace.” This quote struck me as I thought about race and racism; I equated racism with “the love of power” and the quote took on a whole new level of meaning for me. As I looked at this mural each day, I was reminded of my responsibility to use the “power of love” in order to stamp out racism and inequality.