

# KILLING CANARIES: A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

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*This article interweaves a personal narrative with feminist, experiential, and justice-focused educational tenets. The author's individual story occurs in the collegial context of educational efforts to address significant social issues—particularly racism—connected to Hurricane Katrina. A critical “canary” incident of oppression provides an avenue for exploring universal dynamics of sexism and interlocking isms.*



Three weeks after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc in the Gulf Coast, I participated in a meeting enjoining three educational institutions. Representatives from three universities met to brainstorm about how we might collaborate on educational efforts related to Hurricane Katrina and the social issues to which that catastrophe brought attention—most specifically race. Seven of the nine participants, including myself, hold administrative or faculty positions at local universities; two were students. Two private universities and one public institution were represented.

## **Canaries, Context, and Characters**

Early in the discussion, I mentioned that I see the disenfranchised people who bore the brunt of Hurricane Katrina—in death, devastation, and displacement—as the “canaries” of our culture. I elaborated that miners used to send a canary into a mine to test whether the air was safe for them. If the canary did not return, the miners knew the environment was dangerous and they would likely not survive working there. I drew the comparison that the environment of our world is becoming dangerously deadly—in myriad aspects, including ecology, social policies, political structures, cultural values, and so forth. The most vulnerable of our community are the canaries of our culture. They warn us that we are creating an uninhabitable world. If the canaries cannot live in this environment, no one can ultimately survive. None of us are really free to live until it is so for all. As West

(1993), declared, “We have to keep track at any social moment of who is bearing most of the social cost” (p. 4).

I did not anticipate that in this meeting I would have a canary-like experience. Here's my story, told from my bird's eye view. I have changed names to provide a degree of anonymity and to protect my rights to free speech. My perspective is that of one individual; but my story is universal to what many experience. As an older feminist, I realize at deep levels, both experientially and intellectually, that sexism is perennial, persistent, and pandemic—even, and perhaps particularly, in academia (Grise-Owens, 2002). So, I thought I was inured to these type incidents. But, this canary experience left me newly incensed and airless.

First, let me introduce the context and characters in this story. The meeting was held on a Sunday evening in the home of a black male, Luther, and his white female partner, Gloria. Both Luther and Gloria are administrators at a private university—with teaching roles, as well. The only other black participant was Matthew, an undergraduate student at the same private university. Other than Gloria and me, the only other female was Guiselle, a white graduate student at the private university where I teach. Guiselle's spouse, Alex, also attended; he is a white male administrator at the other private university. Three other white males attended. Damien teaches philosophy and Joe teaches history at the public university. Paul teaches in the same School of Social Work where I teach.



To my knowledge, all participants identify as heterosexual. Also, it appeared that no persons with disabilities were present. I make these observations because I will be describing who participated in this meeting. However, I have learned that it is just as essential—and oftentimes more significant—to note who is *not* at the tables of discussion.

### **Voices Heard...and Hidden**

As we arrived, Luther and Gloria graciously welcomed us all. Throughout the evening, Luther's eloquent refrain was that we must change the discourse—specifically about race. Luther continually and collaboratively called for us to “do something different.” I must say up front that Damien and Alex seemed to genuinely attempt to be collaborative contributors. They creatively and constructively engaged and respectfully disagreed in the conversation. While Alex and Damien subtly benefited from white male privilege—e.g., in how readily their ideas were received—they did not engage in overtly dominating behavior.

Guiselle spoke infrequently and, though she offered good ideas, her tone often seemed conciliatory or hesitant. Matthew, the only other black voice in the room, was largely silent. Of course, the power differential of Matthew's and Guiselle's position as students in a roomful of professors impacted the dynamics. The two students also appeared to be the youngest persons in the room; so, their student role, minority status, and age placed them in the least privileged positions in the room. The vast majority of the airspace was taken by Joe and Paul.

As the discussion evolved, we began to sketch out a plan for a one- or two- day community forum on Hurricane Katrina. As we talked about identifying our audience and establishing a format, Gloria, who had been in and out of the room (serving food), suggested a four-phase agenda for the event. Paul, in a badgering tone, attacked Gloria's idea. He verbally hammered her about the logistics being unrealistic. Gloria politely attempted to clarify that she was simply making suggestions and the specific time frames would need to be worked out later. Paul overrode her voice.

After loudly blustering and blistering for several minutes (taking up air space without really saying anything and causing general discomfort), Paul said, “Oh, I'm not disagreeing with you.” My interpretation: After administering a verbal smacking he said, “Oh, I didn't mean to hurt you.” Abuse dynamics are similar, regardless of the context, relationship, and level of engagement.

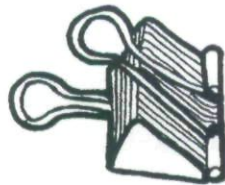
At some point during the evening, Paul defended some “fact” by declaring, “Well, two and two is four!” I interjected, “Yes, but it could also be twenty-two.” Paul, derisively said, “Well, you knew what I meant.”

Yes, Paul, I knew what you meant because I have learned in order to survive that I must speak the language of male dominance, which claims absolute, measurable knowledge as its unquestioned birthright. I have learned through extensive tutelage about male dominance, which cuts off any alternative interpretations with: “Why should I try to know what you mean, because what I mean holds priority of power? And, how dare you challenge my purview by voicing another view?” I have learned that the masculine voice of rationality, rules, and objectivity is seen as “real,” whereas the feminine voices of relationship, dialogue, and multiple realities are silenced and “hidden” (Weick, 2000).

Amongst the many ironies of this evening, my proposal to discuss the intersection and interlocking of *isms* (Andersen & Collins, 2001; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003) was met with a range of hesitation, resistance, and avoidance. The masculine perspective of needing to consider things in singularity, isolation, hierarchy (e.g., Schriver, 2004) seemed to dominate. Similarly, Joe and Paul (and perhaps others) seemed intent on the primacy of giving the audience “expert” knowledge. I had the distinct impression that Joe believes it is imperative that he tell students all they need to know and lecture is his primary (sole?) mode of teaching. I know from his communications within our School that Paul believes that teaching is “about the teacher being the expert” and the classroom is “not a democracy”: hierarchical, disempowering notions.



Any singular, hierarchical way of knowing is limited. As I point out to students, DWMs (Dead White Males) are the primary purveyors of knowledge valued in our culture. I clarify that I am not saying we should discard all DWM knowledge—much of that knowledge is valid and valuable. But, I emphasize that white male dominant knowledge is a mere fraction of the multiple ways of knowing—and some of the dominant “reality” is oppression and disempowerment cloaked in sheepskin-sanctioned “knowledge.” To continue to uncritically accept hegemonic knowledge as whole knowledge keeps oppressed individual’s and group’s knowing as invisible, inconsequential, marginalized, and powerless (Davis, 1990; Minnich, 1994; Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005).



### Ways of Knowing/Teaching/Learning

Myriad ways of knowing makes for more diverse, complex, complete learning (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, Carter, 1996; Belenky, et al., 1994). For example, I learn about oppression and dominance through my lived experience as a white female (who grew up poor) in this culture. I learn about “isms” through my conversations and relationships with those who share their experiences with me. Disenfranchised persons who seek empowerment must use multiple perspectives for our learning. Otherwise, we remain disempowered by believing that his-story is normative and singular (Friere, 1971).

Nevertheless, during this brainstorming meeting, I spoke the masculine lingo in ways to legitimize my input for my primary audience—by citing experts, specifically a primary text that I use in social work practice classes. I suggested using the core concepts articulated in Finn and Jacobson’s (2003) *Just Practice* framework—i.e., power, history, meaning, context, and possibility—as a way to frame our discussion about Katrina.

Although one of the males murmured verbiage that indicated minimal interest, this idea was not pursued by anyone else in the group. Because the *Just Practice* framework was unknown to them, I conjecture that the men assumed it must not be “real.” After all, these experts (i.e., Finn & Jacobson) were not expertly identified from the males’ expert expertise about experts—but that of a woman’s experience.

As a feminist, criticalist social work educator, I believe the best educational experiences are empowering and engaging (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Dore, 1994; Figueira-McDonough, Netting, & Nichols-Casebolt, 1998; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Nichols-Casebolt, Figueira-McDonough, & Netting, 2000). I advocated for interactive, shared learning as part of the event we were planning. I suggested we call the experience a “Learn In” rather than a “Teach In” (which, one male participant had suggested, was reminiscent of the 1960s). For me, Teach-in connotes a more “sage on the stage,” let-us-tell-you-what-you-need-to-know lecture approach, whereas, “Learn In” connotes a “guide on the side,” shared, facilitative process. As Goldstein (2001) said, a teaching model for education is “...didactic, deductive, ‘top-down’”. In contrast, a learning model is experiential, inductive, and ‘bottom up’” (p. 8).

My approach to any educational endeavor—particularly with adults—is that it must engender dialogue (Vella, 2002). Any significant, life-impacting learning is not just about the dissemination of expertise and information. Transformative, socially responsible learning engages and encompasses personal experiences, diverse ways of knowing, social constructions, and spiritual connections (hooks, 1994; hooks, 2003; Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005). This synergetic, criticalist learning approach not only challenges oppressive, unjust structures, it shapes social change and creates communities of justice and wholeness. For me, to collaborate on an educational forum on the Katrina catastrophe’s connections with ingrained oppression and injustice, and not plan an event using this approach, would be a further



travesty. As too often happens in education, we risk recapitulating the very dynamics that conscientious education seeks to eradicate.

A primary way that transformative, synergetic learning occurs is through engaged, critical conversations. So, in our brainstorming session, I used language such as “having a conversation,” citing Phyllis Wheatley’s writings (2002) about how “all social change begins with conversation.” Notably, this idea of conversation was one of the very few times that Matthew spoke. He suggested that we have follow-up, ongoing cyber-conversation as follow-up to our Sunday conversations. Perhaps this avenue seemed a more likely way for Matthew to have his voice heard.

I also suggested that we incorporate action steps into the experience—i.e., not just talk about these issues, but plan what we were going to do about them. The idea for action steps seemed to be well received. However, the ideas about interactive learning were largely met with trepidation. White male participants expressed concerns that we could “lose control” during that interactive element.

### **Hives, Hitting, Hegemony, and Humor**

At one point, I suggested using a specific interactive exercise to engage the audience in understanding the intersection of isms, privilege, and dominance. In response to my advocating interactive learning, Joe said, “That gives me hives.” Being well-trained by our culture to be a caretaking female, I tried to diffuse Joe’s pain and his apparent repulsion with this idea. I playfully walked toward Joe—in my mind I was simply trying to separate the growing gulf between us by taking steps toward him. Joe recoiled, putting up his hands defensively, saying, “You are not going to hug me!”

No, Joe, I do not want to hug you. Furthermore, I apologize—to myself. I am sorry that I fell into old patterns of feeling responsible for your hives. I am not responsible for your hives or hurts. You can go to a doctor and get treatment for your hives. However, remember that even male-dominated medicine is finding that as much as we try to protect ourselves from “having hives,” soon our bodies develop immunities. The proliferation of

medications is becoming problematic in itself. So, wise health advocates tell us to address the systemic causes of our “hives” rather than hiding them through quickfixes. Otherwise, the medications can actually weaken our abilities to deal with some of the hurts and hives that come through living. So, when a really big bug (or bird) bites—not just an uppity feminist flea that gets under your skin, unsettling your controlled world—we get sicker and sicker, and deader and deader.

Truthfully, as this encounter with Joe and Paul progressed, I was reminded of the story my friend Donna tells of picking up her daughter, Sarah, at daycare and learning that Sarah had been hitting her preschool peer, Jack. Donna corrected Sarah with a preschool-size “talk” about how it was okay to be angry but that Sarah needed to use her words to express her anger. Sarah listened earnestly, nodding her head in apparent agreement. Donna, the proud parent, thought, “Ah. Problem solved. Preschool war averted.” That is, until Sarah quietly, but emphatically enunciating each word, asserted, “But, I don’t want to talk to him. I want to hit him!” Like Sarah, I did not want to talk to, much less hug, Joe or Paul. I wanted to hit them. But, being a pacifist lover of language, I made a valiant effort to overcome my preschool proclivity. I attempted to use my words—when I could get some air space.

During this male-dominated discussion, I am sure that I probably began to sound “shrill” at times. Women are oftentimes characterized as “shrill” when they do not speak in soft, uncertain, appeasing tones but dare claim their voices. It was no accident that Howard Dean being characterized as “shrill” was the death knoll for his presidential bid. There are few more condescending connotations for a man than being “feminized.” Women are shrill and emotional; men are forceful and assured. As Valian (1999) documented in synthesizing numerous studies, males exhibiting “feminine” behaviors are often perceived negatively, e.g., as less competent. However, Valian noted that females are often placed in lose-lose positions: If a female acts “feminine” she is dismissed as weak or incompetent; if she behaves in a



“masculine” way she is penalized for being “unfeminine.”

Later in the evening, Joe characterized the different threads of discussion as, “Well, we have those who want to focus on content and those who want to do touchy-feely stuff.” I attempted to refrain from being defensive about having my ideas dismissed as “touchy-feely.” I attempted to convey that I believed in order to change the discourse, we must look at both form and content. I further conjectured that perhaps part of the reason the content had not been “gotten” by our intended audiences was because we needed to look at different forms of engaging the content.

At this point, Joe yelled (dare I say, shrilled!), “That’s bullshit...” Frankly, with that outburst, I had had it. The rest of Joe’s words (in my head) went something like: “blah, blah, blah, blah, brotherhood; blah, blah, blah, blah, brotherhood.” I know he said something about the brotherhood and bringing the brotherhood together. Exasperated at the impenetrable sexism, I simply said, “Well, at least when we talk about the brotherhood, could we talk about the sisterhood, too?” And, I went to do what any good feminist knows to do when in these situations: I found a sister to talk with....

I escaped to the kitchen (still a familiar habitat for most females). There, Gloria was bagging up leftover chips and sandwiches. Joining her, I observed to Gloria that I found it hard to stomach that four white guys were primarily setting the agenda for a discussion about race and at the same time a woman was cleaning up the kitchen. Gloria smiled and told me a story of when she was a young sociology major. She was one of only two women in the class of a renowned male sociologist. This teacher said to the women that in his sociological estimation they belonged in the kitchen. Wryly, as she laid out dessert, Gloria noted, “We really haven’t come very far.” Adding insult to irony, Gloria also revealed that the idea for this collaborative endeavor was generated by two women. Gloria and the female spouse of one of the males had been casually talking, came up with the idea for the three universities to collaborate on this topic, and shared the idea with their respective spouses.

At an earlier point in the evening, Joe had declared that the event we were planning must have at least 300 attendees or it would “be a failure.” I said, “Are you serious?” (I really did wonder if he was being humorous and felt a slight tremble of anticipatory hope. Humor can be a great equalizer and stress reliever.) Joe clarified, “Yes, it has to be at least 300. I have at least that many in my classes each week.” I half-heartedly attempted to offer a balance to the perennial masculine perspective that bigger is better—except for female body size. I offered, “I think thirty people with synergy can accomplish more than 300 people who just come and sit.” Luther, with astute diplomacy, said, “Well, I’d like to have 300 and synergy!”

But, in that crystallizing moment, I realized that we had come to the crux of this meeting’s purpose: to get the “Joes” and “Pauls” a bigger audience for their hegemonic “knowledge.” Been there! Done that! And, it didn’t even get me my tenured tee-shirt! I had to learn to sew my own.

#### **Reflections on the Experience: Common Canary Narratives**

As I struggled for airspace in this airless mine of white hetero-male dominance, I had a stark vision of our culture’s “canaries” of color: canaries with disabilities; LGBTQ, poor, female canaries—and anyone who was not like the majority of privileged birds in that room—gasping for air. Meanwhile, the hegemonic hawks and eagles continued to opine: “We tried to teach them. Too bad they never learned.”

Some would criticize that I was “being sensitive” to the dynamics I named. They are right. But, when did it become a negative to be described as sensitive? Like the “shrill” characterization noted earlier, “sensitive” is viewed as feminine, and, thus, a negative in our canary-killing culture; however, “objective” is viewed as masculine and, hence, a positive attribute. Of course, I’m sensitive! I’m a canary! I’m saying, “Stop killing the canaries—for all the birds’ sakes!”

Yes, this canary experience sucked the air right out of me. Yet, I still hold hope that the birds of a feather will flock together (i.e., synergy of the disenfranchised) with the ally



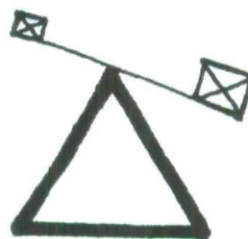
eagles and hawks who are willing to be partners (rather than just Flapping Big Birds). I still believe that we really can collectively, collaboratively, and—yes, dear, Joe—experientially create a new world where canaries and birds of every feather and color can live to sing new songs. And, there can even be a place for turkeys like Paul and Joe, but, only if they learn not to gobble up more than their airshare and they change their unharmonious solo tunes.

As for this particular bird, this experience unsettled and angered me; it has continued to be a critical incident for reflection. A few days after the incident, I meandered through a bookstore in Providence, Rhode Island. I was still seething, and seeking resolution to my canary experience. So perhaps it was, indeed, providence (and past experience in having read some of her writings) that drew me to pick up bell hooks' (1995) *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. Here's an excerpt from the first paragraph of the first chapter, "Introduction—Race Talk," of that book:

*When race and racism are the topic in public discourse the voices that speak are male... Cultural refusal to listen to and legitimize the power of women speaking about the politics of race and racism in America is a direct reflection of a long tradition of sexist and racist thinking which has always represented race and racism as male turf, as hard politics, a playing field where women do not really belong. It presumes that the business of race is down and dirty stuff, and therefore like all male locker rooms, spaces no real woman would want to enter. Given these institutionalized exclusions, it is not surprising that so few women choose to publicly 'talk race.'* (p. 1-2)

Reading hooks reminded me that I am not a lone canary. I was reminded of the power of sharing "canary" views. This canary did not return to the airless mine dominated by Paul and Joe. The planning continued, a forum was held, and it was a "failure"—using Joe's measurement. When I was younger I would have thought leaving was defeat and probably would have persevered. As an older (and hopefully wiser) feminist, I have learned that sometimes it is more productive to leave a battleground and, instead, seek places of common ground. So, I continue to have fruitful conversations with individuals from the group (other than Paul and Joe). I seek healthier avenues for collaborating on addressing the Katrina phenomena. For example, I collaborated with other faculty to integrate/adapt assignments related to Katrina in our Social Work curriculum.

My canary story does not compare to the intensity of the Hurricane Katrina victims' experiences. However, the complex dynamics of oppression are similar—regardless of intensity and context. I hope that my bird's eye view can encourage other canaries to realize the legitimacy of their views, claim their voices, and tell their song-stories too. As Weick (1994) noted, "Stories are a form of knowledge and, some would say, the only knowledge we have" (p. 222). Our narratives inform, empower, and construct realities. As the purpose statement of *Reflections—Narratives of Professional Helping* articulates, our narratives "shape social change." And, as Wheatley (2002) contends: "All social change begins with conversation." The powerful wake of Hurricane Katrina brought a flood of narratives about oppression and desecration. In the aftermath, let's use the Katrina crisis as an opportunity. Sister and Brother Canaries, let's sing our stories. Let's call ourselves to conversation. Together with allies, let's shape social change by addressing





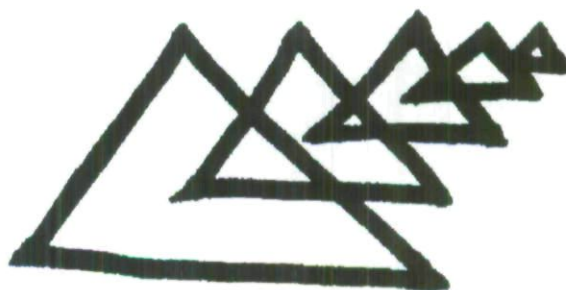
oppression and revitalizing hope. Let's use our narratives to "restory" equity and common good.

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