

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore – And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over – like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

– Langston Hughes



by

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A Professional Dream Deferred

Racism hurts.

Racism sometimes stings, sometimes bites and, too often, cuts deep. Racism crushes dreams, destroys hopes, and slaughters spirits. I do not know this from reading books or watching webinars. I know this from lived experience – personally and professionally.

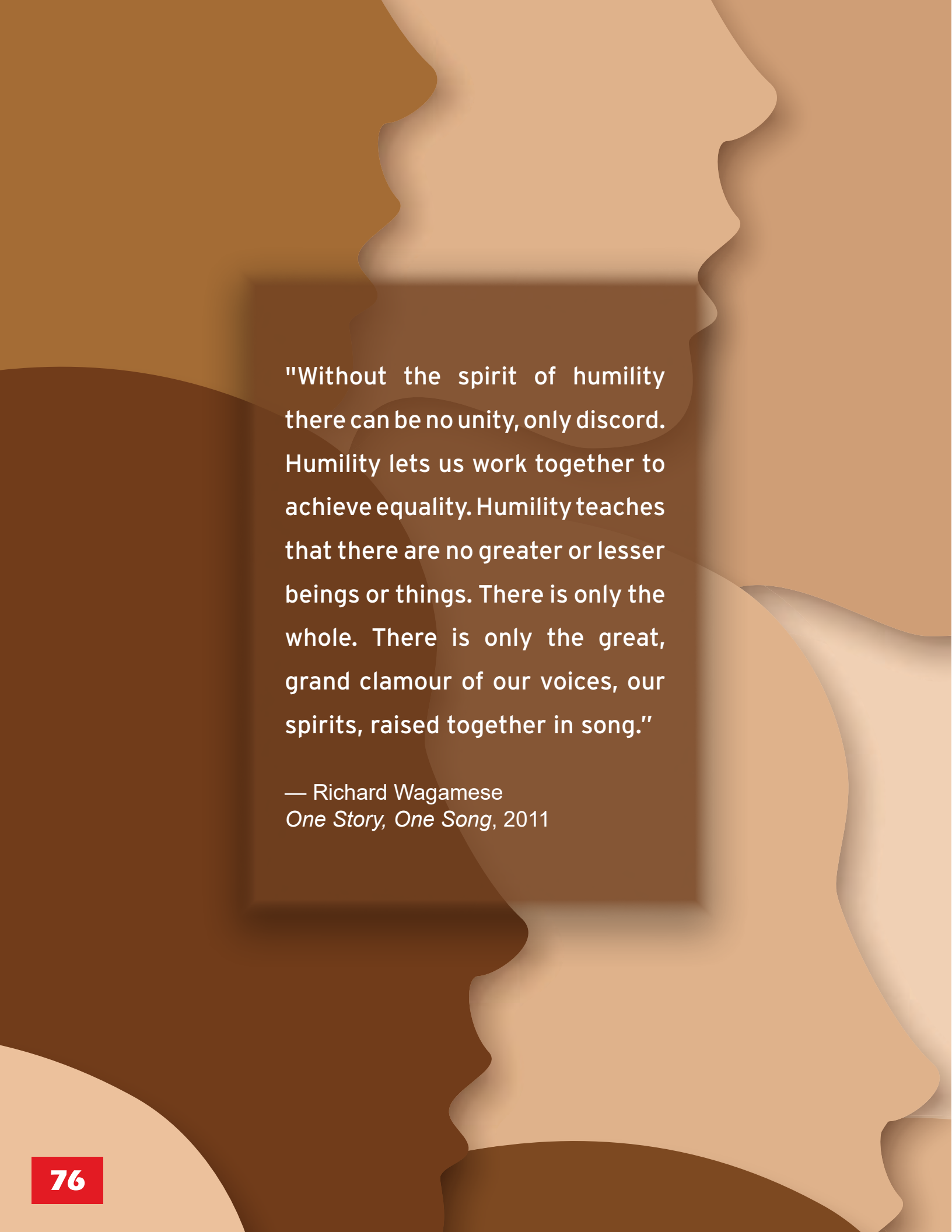
I started my Anti-Racist journey young. From standing up against racism on gravel and grass fields to asking tough questions in classrooms, from calling out prejudice on playgrounds to pointing out the erasure of Black History in Socials class, I have carefully spoken up against racial discrimination since grade school. If a nine-year-old bi-racial Black child in a predominantly white school can muster up the courage to face racial injustice, the reluctant leaders of present-day school communities most certainly can; in fact, they must.

I am aware that my opening comments will inspire some, and annoy or scare others. That has been – and continues to be – the paradoxical nature of my professional life. Often celebrated for exposing systemic racism in our education system, yet equally criticized for not hitting hard enough. Though I have been consciously doing Anti-Racism work since 2006 when I first read Canadian scholar George J. Sefa Dei's work *Anti-Racism Education: Theory & Practice* (1996), I am not an Anti-Racism expert. Those who have been reading and learning about Anti-Racism know that the journey is never ending. I will never be done as my learning and growth will never be complete. I have been a student, a student-teacher, a teacher, a school administrator, and I am now a District Vice-Principal in the BC public school system. As a student in B.C. public schools, I had to find and create opportunities to bring my cultural heritages into the classroom. As a teacher, I had to search for and create units and lessons (initially, without the benefit of Google) that

were more culturally inclusive, and to learn how to create safe spaces for discussions about racism, stereotypes, and discrimination. As a school-based administrator, I have had to pick and choose very carefully when to highlight inequities in policy and practice at the school and district levels. Such work has been risky, and often does not endear one to their colleagues. Yet now, as a District Vice-Principal of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, this has specifically become my work. *Somebody pinch me!*

I have dreamt of doing Anti-Racism work in a recognized position for years. I once considered leaving a Vice-Principalship for an Anti-Racism teacher-lead position. I was encouraged to move to Ontario where work in Anti-Racism education had started in schools. Tempting, but I never wanted to leave British Columbia.

Sadly, it took modern-day lynchings and a racial reckoning for many privileged folks to open their eyes to the reality of racial inequities in Canada, in our province, and in our school system. I know and recognize the suffering and sacrifices that have led to recent opportunities to fight against oppression in school districts. It is the reality of that pain and loss that inspires me to move colleagues from awareness and concern, to action, and eventually to transformation. I do not share this in order to shame or blame, but rather to reveal. I do not believe valuable learning and growth come from shame and guilt. In fact, it is my experience that shame shuts most folks down. I centre this work in the *Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being*, the wisdom of the *First Peoples Principles of Learning*, and the generosity of cultural humility (Dr. Evan Adams – First Nations Health Authority) which all teach us to suspend judgement and express compassion. Indigenous colleagues have taught me to always try to remain humble — not just state that I am humble but to sincerely sit with humility:



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Humility lets us work together to
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— Richard Wagamese
One Story, One Song, 2011

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This is especially important when listening to racialized folks who are bravely willing to share their lived experiences. Humility is also essential when working with white folks on issues of implicit bias, privilege, and power – providing a safe space for people to 'try things on', to accept new perspectives, and to learn and grow without judgement. I also ground my work in the Maasai traditional greeting "*Casserian Njera*" which, translated from the Maa language, means "*How are the children?*" Maasai warriors in Kenya and northern Uganda constantly ask and answer this question. "It is always on their minds, in their hearts, and floating in the air." (Fania E. Davis, *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice*, 2019) I try my best to keep students at the centre of this work because, as educational leaders, we are responsible for our society's most vulnerable and defenseless. Whenever the grown-ups become tangled up in 'race or oppression Olympics' – competitions about whose genocide is worse, and who has it worse, or in arguments about racism being harsher back East and in the U.S. than here in B.C. – I choose to avoid the discourse as it especially pits racialized groups against each other. Instead, I focus on improving the lives of all students and their families. When folks become stuck in opinions and egos, we can usually find common ground in our motivation to make all students feel welcome, heard and included.

I am so fortunate to have worked in three B.C. school districts, and to be able to continue to work with and support a few districts in the Lower Mainland. This work has definitively shown me that despite some cultural differences, there are many commonalities in the concerns, fears, and hopes of administrators when it comes to dealing with racism in school communities. My bi-racial heritage provides me with a special ability to walk in two worlds, and to be more aware of the invisible cultures in which I move. It allows me to recognize common human struggles and joys. Having worked in a number of districts, I have seen how similar our values, experiences, fears, hopes and reactions are despite the geographical, cultural, and socio-economic differences of our school communities. Because of this, I know, without question, that there is no valid excuse for *not* acting against racism. School leaders can no longer project their own fears onto racialized students and families, claiming that such discussions and school or district initiatives would prove too upsetting, disruptive, or contentious.

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The dangers of leaders within the education system not recognizing the importance of Anti-Racism work – or diluting it by merely giving it lip service – include the disengagement of racialized students and their families, increased feelings of mistrust, and the loss of a powerful opportunity to work toward healing, and toward truth and reconciliation. School and district leaders' fears of engaging in

Anti-Racism work are real and legitimate. However, we can no longer hide behind our anxieties.

If you are a leader who is reluctant to take action because you fear the critiques of social justice activists in your school community, or a leader who avoids taking risks because you are afraid of making a mistake, saying the wrong things, and letting your own bias show, then it is time to stop evading. Your silence and inaction are harming students and families with much more severity than if you messed up while trying to act. In trying and in failing, there are opportunities to learn and grow. While trying, there are opportunities to reach out to racialized students, to their families and to your critics for support and collaboration. Such relationship building can be powerful, and is often transformative. I admit there are many ways that tackling issues of race can get us publicly denounced. We must do this work with care, while remaining mindful of process. No one wants to be the villain in the next horror story on the news about racism in schools. It can be unnerving in a world where intentions no longer matter, where asking *“How can I help?”* may get you in hot water. However, our reasons for engaging in Anti-Racism work cannot simply be to avoid bad publicity and vulnerability. Such motivation makes the work disingenuous and hollow.

Recent events of racial injustice have become a part of our collective conscience. There is much media attention right now, but it comes and goes. The media cannot be that spark that incites us to take action; the impetus must be the well-being of our students, families, staff, and colleagues. There is no time for performance art. We cannot disrupt the dominant culture with tokenistic attempts at education reform. Staff, students and families are acutely aware of the hostile racial climates that exist in many schools, and they are firm in their resolve to transform the education system.

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School leaders need to stop being reactive. They need to proactively challenge staff around deficit-based thinking about racialized students, and make it clear that there is zero tolerance for differential treatment based on race, racially demeaning comments, race-based jokes, the use of the n-word, and other racial slurs. School and district leaders do not earn the trust of racialized folks when they appropriately react to public displays of racial discrimination and hatred, such as racist slurs spray-painted across the wall of a school building. Staff, students and families look more sharply to their administrator’s handling of the day-to-day microaggressions and racist incidents that students experience in classrooms, in the hallways and on the playgrounds. When *that* work is grounded in Anti-Racism, administrators will build stronger, more trusting relationships. When it comes to complaints, leaders must listen: not to judge, not to respond, but to believe, to validate and – most importantly – to act. Leaders must also constantly probe their own actions for performance, because if they lack authenticity, they will be called out for performative ally-ship. Remember: ‘window dressing’ is insulting. Administrators need to have a pure, authentic, and unapologetic commitment to Anti-Racism work.

The fact that close proximity to whiteness is rewarded in our society is not lost on me. I acknowledge that it comes with privileges and currency. As a light-skinned Bi-racial Black educator, I can attest to this. My experiences are

not the same, and will never be the same, as any other person whose skin marker is Black or Brown. All leaders must be conscious of this. Because of white supremacist culture, racialized folks can also internalize racism and invest in the dominant culture. We all must be aware of our privileges, “not only how we are implicated in, but also how we are complicit in a system that we reap benefits from – and then consciously and continuously divest from it.” (Sefa Dei and Vásquez Jiménez, 2017) My “dream deferred” definitely “sugar[ed] over – like a syrupy sweet”, as I have been afforded so many opportunities to work with remarkable staff, students, families and community groups using Anti-Racist strategies to help students succeed, irrespective of their racial backgrounds. There are no words – to say the journey has been rewarding is exceedingly inadequate. Working toward making several school communities more equitable, and being able to support and validate in those small everyday moments has been such a gift – a gift of growth, perspective, and human connection.

In Burnaby School District #41, incredible work is being done by students, staff, school leaders, district leaders and trustees. Presentations, workshops, clubs, committees, and school initiatives that I used to only dream of seeing have now come to fruition. I am proud to work in a district that is not afraid to say, “*We can do better*”, and which has committed to an Anti-Racism plan that respects and honours the voices and lived experiences of those affected by systemic racism, implicit bias and discrimination. There is much richness and joy in Anti-Racist education, and it warms my heart to see that so many have begun to embrace the journey instead of fear it.

Education spaces are not innocent. They continue to be places of injury, pain, and vulnerability, but they are also places of validation, love, resilience, and freedom. Should you have the luxury of never

having experienced racism, please believe those who have. Recognize it as a systemic problem, but act locally. Do not merely reside in courageous conversations.

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I urge you to use the power and privilege that come with your leadership role to take Anti-Racism action, and “create the schools we are taught to believe are impossible: schools built on justice, love, joy and anti-racism.” (Dr. Bettina Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, 2019) If you cannot, I implore you to get out of the way and allow those who *have* the will to push on with this courageous work. Please do not disparage or impede the Anti-Racist work of your colleagues. Support them. Stop considering Anti-Racism work as an ‘add-on’ or an ‘extra’. Anti-Racism education is good for everyone, not just for racial minorities. This work is not easy: it is messy and uncomfortable. We have seen what the opposition looks like, and what they stand for. We can no longer afford to wait for the right time, a more comfortable time, or a less ‘charged’ time. The time has long come.

“With earnest humility in the face of the heavy lift before us, let us begin.”

— Matthew R. Kay
Not Light, But Fire, 2018