

Prosody

Sabrina Williamson Sullenberger

Abstract: “Prosody” is my narrative and poetic reflection on the importance of genuine relationship to understanding another's experience.

Keywords: reflection, relationship, journeys, poetry

In the fall of 2020, in the midst of virtual and hybrid learning, I was taking a walk with a friend who is a social work professor at another university. It was a conversation we had while walking around her neighborhood that led to the poem below. She is Black and I am white, but otherwise we have a number of similarities. We have same-aged children, our faith is important to us, we love our work, and we are invested in our children’s public schools. We love to laugh and tell stories and cheer on our kids. We both care about equity and justice and being anti-racist. I cherish the time I get to spend with her.

Our conversation that day was a mix of the personal and professional, which is typical for us. We talked about our work with college students, seemingly never-ending committees, raising tweens, and our then seventh-graders’ experience with a particular subject at our middle school. It was while we were talking about our “middle school kids” that I realized she has to think differently about some situations than I do, because of the ways our children are seen by others. I knew this on some level previously, but that day I heard it differently.

Having this realization on a personal level helped me shape my teaching and strengthened my commitment to anti-racist education. It also shaped the way I looked at my own parenting and led to some different conversations with my family.

The poem below is in haiku verse because I tend to use a lot of words and I wanted to challenge myself to speak succinctly about this important topic. At the same time, I wanted to share authentically about my evolving awareness of racism and my awareness of my failures in being anti-racist. Finally, I took a creative writing class in college, and I remember the professor challenging us to write in a different type of poem each week, so that while our brains were busy with the prosody (metrical patterns and structure), what was in our spirits could better emerge.

How mothers worry
For the fate of their children
Is color-coded.

Is she happy? Loved?
She knows her worth and value?
These are my questions.

I hear the questions,
Worries of other mothers
Today in our world.

Is she seen beyond
The color of her skin? And—
Will he come home safe?

Privilege shapes me
I know this—I also know
I don't really know.

Centering whiteness
Is a personal default—
A habit and sin.

True relationships
Can be a touchpoint for growth
Onus to change = me

Learning. Commitment.
Beloved community.
Imperfect ally.

About the Author: Sabrina Williamson Sullenberger, PhD (she/her) is Professor, Department of Social Work, Belmont University, Nashville, TN (sabrina.sullenberger@belmont.edu, teachingbeloved.com).