

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

The Art of Moving Forward: Ascension, Authenticity, and Embodiment

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeanine L. Williams, PhD, is a higher education professional with over two decades of experience teaching, designing, and managing postsecondary literacy programs and courses. The impact of Dr. Williams' work in program and curricular redesign, and faculty

training has been felt in postsecondary literacy and learning arenas throughout the nation and across the globe. She is a highly respected thought leader who has delivered dozens of webinars, keynote addresses, and conference presentations. She has also authored numerous scholarly publications and held leadership positions in several professional organizations. Dr. Williams is the founder of Williams Higher Ed, an organization focused on creating and sustaining authentic, aligned, liberating communities of learning/practice within higher education.

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It is such a pleasure to join you all today. I am grateful to Jonathan and Amanda for inviting me to be a part of this Conference. And I want to give a special shoutout to James Dyer for reaching out to me and for “brokering the deal.”

As I perused the conference schedule and looked at all of the session titles, I was so excited and inspired by all of the great work that is being done. But, I have to say, I was not surprised. You see, those of us in fields of literacy, learning, and academic support have always done great work. We have always worked tirelessly to move all students forward. We have always found ways to network across service areas, albeit informally, to weave together a web of services to support students in all aspects of their academic and personal lives. And while our work has always been pushed to the margins, and we know that, more importantly, our students are a living testament of the vital role we serve in academia. So, I want to congratulate you all and remind you to not believe the hype! Regardless of how much we are talked down and made to feel unimportant, make no mistake that the work that we do is the lifeblood of our institutions. Point blank, period, end of story!

This morning, I will share with you some thoughts that I have on what I am calling the art of moving forward. During our time together, I will share with you some of my journey, some of the lessons learned, and what I see for myself moving forward. Along with this, I would like for us to have a time of conversation and communal care, so I have reserved a portion of my time today to devote to just that. I will let you know that this will not be a traditional keynote address, so I ask that you open your minds, soften your souls, and hear with your hearts what I have been inspired to share.

Now, while I am here before you today, speaking with authority and conviction about the value of our work, I have to be totally transparent. The past several months have been hard. I found myself in such a dark place professionally and personally as I metabolized the state of our field: the never-ending struggles, the crazy legislation, the inconceivable cuts in funding, the ever-increasing workloads, the audacious expectation that we exhaust ourselves providing free labor, the blatant disregard for our humanity and the humanity of our students, all with no end in sight and the sad reality that it will only get worse. And that was just thinking about what is happening within higher education. When I considered what is happening in our country and across the world, all of

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the sadness and all of the sorrow propelled me into total despair. I was paralyzed with grief, with anger, and with fear.

For the first time in my professional life, I was at a complete loss. I had no words of hope or faith, there was no framework or theory from which I could draw strength, there was no new idea or curriculum, or strategy that I could imagine to make things better. I was exhausted, and battle-worn, and just completely resigned. And that feeling of resignation that emanated from the deepest recesses of my heart and my mind was soul-crushing. You see, I had devoted my life to this work. I had studied and toiled and pushed myself to unimaginable levels so that I could make a difference in this field. I had sacrificed so much of my time, so much of my life, for this work only to watch it become unrecognizable in the most atrocious of ways. And for me, the final nail in the coffin was having to sit helplessly by as they erased legislation and legal protections for folks who look like me, for folks who live outside of heteronormativity, for folks who want and need to exercise their reproductive autonomy, and the list goes on and on. I don't know about you but there is nothing more soulless and dark than legislating against folks' humanity. At this point, the only thing I could do was to be angry, to be fueled by my rage, my righteous rage. The only thing I could do was to speak truth to power in meetings—putting it all on the line to hold my superiors accountable. The only thing that I could do was to fight and to rage and to demand that I not be erased. The only thing that I could do was to assert my humanity—pleading to be seen—begging to matter. And when all of the anger and all of the rage proved to be futile, the only thing that I could do then was to cocoon myself in my sorrow. The only thing that I could do was to feel every stroke of my grief. The only thing that I could do was to cry and sometimes the sobs were so deep that they literally took my breath away. And after all the tears were gone, the only thing that I could do then was to rest.

Now, I am not talking about just sleeping in or taking naps or laying around watching tv. I am talking about deep rest, meditative rest, contemplative rest, healing rest, soul-nourishing rest. I am talking about that restorative rest that purges all of the negativity and all of the sorrow and all of the strife. I am talking about that soul rest where you reconnect with who you truly are, your essence, your aura, and all the

things that you were before these institutional and world systems stripped you of your identity, your dignity, your humanity. And so, for the past four months, that is what I have been doing. I've been resting. I have been communing with the universe, and with nature, and my ancestors, and my babies, and my family, and my friends, and with anything and everything that is full of light, full of hope, and full of peace. For the past four months, I have traded my work ethic for a rest ethic. I have cultivated rest as a daily and intentional practice. Rest has become my sanctuary, my peace, my prayers, my divine inspiration.

As I emerged from that deep rest, I have been reborn, renewed, I am not the same. I walk different, I talk different, I think different, I see different, I hear different, I am different. I am forever changed. I will never go back to the old me. It is as if I have ascended to a new timeline, a higher vibration. And rightly so, because the fields of literacy, learning, and academic support have changed. Indeed, the entire world has changed. And if we are going to be able to move students forward, we have to first move ourselves forward—personally and professionally. The old rules, the old ways of being, and knowing and doing, are rendered obsolete. And as we all stand at the edge, we really have no choice but to close our eyes, take a deep breath, and leap. And, yes, taking this leap makes us feel unsure, afraid, and utterly terrified but we cannot afford to stay. If we truly want to move forward, we must simply move forward.

So, let's talk about this leap and what it entails. All of the grief and anger and sorrow and fear and uncertainty are symptoms of the old paradigms falling away. They are symptoms of our transformation—our movement to better, to higher, to more. The beauty of this leap is that it lands us in a place of ascension, authenticity, and embodiment.

Ascension

We have to accept that the old ways are gone. Folks, we are not going back. Reminiscing about and longing for the good old days in literacy, learning, and academic support is a fruitless endeavor. The field is different, the world is different, the students are different, and if we are totally honest with ourselves, we are different. But as we release the old and turn our back on it for good, we must believe that what awaits us, what we can create moving forward is better and more aligned.

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Authenticity

We can no longer wear a mask or simply play the game. We cannot do this ourselves and we can no longer ask this of our students. There is no more falling in line or going along to get along. There is no more blind obedience. Folks, we cannot sit back and be complicit in our own exploitation. We have to practice asserting our humanity daily. There is so much beauty and freedom in being who we truly are. This is the essence of ascension—rising above the fray, the systems, the policies, and the programming that strip us of ourselves.

Embodiment

We can no longer talk about and try to enact equity and justice and inclusion and diversity as if these are entities or ideas outside of ourselves. When we do this, they are easily legislated away. We can be told not to teach and not to talk about these things. But when we embody these things, when we make them who we are, they are impossible to erase. Our embodiment of these principles ensures that they exist and thrive in our personal and professional spaces. This embodiment forges community—true community—where everyone is liberated to show up as their highest, most authentic selves.

So, what does all of this look like for me? To be totally transparent, I am still on this journey, and I have yet to arrive at all of the answers. And truthfully, I probably never will. I am learning to embrace the uncertainty and to be comfortable moving into the unknown. For me this is the essence of ascension, of authenticity, and of embodiment. But as I journey forward, there are some things that I do know for sure.

For one, I am done fighting. I am committed to resting—resting in my mind, resting in my body, and more importantly, resting in my spirit. I am no longer begging to be seen and begging for validation that I matter. Instead, I am just going to be over here mattering. I am no longer asking for my Blackness to be acknowledged and appreciated for all its beauty. Instead, I am going to be over here basking in the beauty of my Blackness. I am no longer begging for recognition of my humanity. Instead, I am going to be over here being human—fully, freely, and unapologetically.

Along with this, I know that I am different and my work and contributions to this field will look different. I am no longer interested in building the system and teaching other professionals and students how to work within the system. I have divested from the system and any allegiance I once had is gone. From here on out, my focus is being authentic and forging community by inviting my students and my colleagues to be who they truly are. And as the system crumbles around us, we are fellowshiping together and building something new and beautiful.

And finally, I am no longer afraid. I will in no way be silenced or forced to live in the shadow of myself. I will move forward boldly, and I will speak and live in my truth with authority and total conviction. And if by doing so, I lose any stature or prestige that this system has assigned to me, then so be it! As someone who has over twenty years in the field, I am called to midwifery and matriarchy as we bring forth something new. I accept and embrace this calling and I look forward with joy and with expectancy to everything, to all of the beauty, and all of the newness, and all of the liberation this journey will bring.

Now as I close out my talk and move into a time of conversation and community with you all, I want to leave you with a few questions for reflection:

- What does it mean for you to rest? What could a rest ethic look like for you?
- In what ways are you stuck and unable to ascend in your professional and personal life?
- What do you fear in letting go? Instead of considering the worst that can happen, how can you imagine the best that could happen?
- Who are you really? Behind the mask and the veil of “professionalism”?
- What can you envision as a more ascended, authentic, and embodied professional practice?

These are complex questions, with no easy answer. But as you move forward today and over the coming months and even years, I urge you to revisit them again and again.

At this point, I want to open things up for community and conversation. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have on what I presented here today, about my work leading up to this point, or even my thoughts on the future. Whatever is on your heart and mind today is welcome.

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