

Fall 2022 Educators in Solidarity Unconference Closing Keynote

Thank you for that incredibly gracious introduction, Dan. I have learned so much from you for over three years, and I am so fortunate to call you a friend and fellow struggler for justice.

What an honor it is to join another Unconference - my sixth by my calculation - and in the capacity as the closing keynote speaker. I'm indebted to Hannah, Dan, and so many members of Educators in Solidarity for their invaluable counsel and collaboration. I admire you all such a great deal.

I commend Greg Casar and Dr. Spencer for their inspiring remarks for this convening. I thank Texas Appleseed for the space & resources to do this work in a way that meets the unique demands of this juncture in history. I laud today's presenters for their brilliance and their expertise. I lift each of you up and offer my gratitude for your commitment to public education at a time when its opponents are particularly relentless.

With all of this in mind, I want to speak with y'all about my grandmothers, for I believe that their stories are instructive for our fight to achieve racial justice in education.

My maternal grandmother was born in 1926 in Rodney, Mississippi. She lived and worked in a farming community in her early years; she was essentially a sharecropper.

My paternal grandmother was born in 1937 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She grew up in a close-knit, though segregated community with her parents and siblings.

My grandmothers - born eleven years apart in Mississippi and North Carolina - understood deeply the grueling demands of racial capitalism. Both were on the older side of a large set of siblings.

My maternal grandmother helped to raise her younger siblings, and my paternal grandmother served as that type of caregiver as well. They worked the land, provided spiritual guidance to their families, and looked ahead to the decades to come – even as they labored in some form throughout their lives.

From my recollection and understanding, these magnanimous women knew that they wanted to be mothers early on in their lives. At 22 and 23, those dreams came to fruition. Between the two of them, they gave birth to 18 children from 1948 to 1968.

My grandmothers - two foundational pillars of my life - persevered through the Jim Crow South to greet me with loving & open arms in 1991.

My family diligently protected me & my sister from the realities of undercompensated work, unsustainable housing costs, and struggles to balance the assets column with the liabilities column - realities that Black people have known intimately & well throughout U.S. history. Based on what I knew then, my grandmothers led the charge. These two irreplaceable women and I were Black Americans living through the twentieth & twenty-first centuries - sustained by the love that we poured into one another.

The decades bring about greater understanding. One grandmother was 65 years older than me, the other was 53 years older than me. Both grandmothers were pretty much retired when I came along. My maternal grandmother served as a teacher in the Madison Parish School System of Louisiana for decades, and my paternal grandmother served as a homemaker & domestic worker, cleaning the homes of wealthy white families in the Winston-Salem area.

By the time I was born in North Carolina, my paternal grandmother opened her home to me and kept me as my parents worked. For Grandparents' Day 2019, I reflected in a personal blog post that Grandma Hairston and I were mischievous together, in every good way imaginable. For example, she allowed me to use Q-Tips to clean my ears when

I wasn't allowed to with my parents. I felt her deep care for me as a grandmother as I also experienced an authentic, nurturing friendship. Grandma Hairston supported my father as a young minister with a new church in Winston-Salem; she attended services with us and contributed her spirit of warmth to a close-knit community

For my maternal grandmother, who went back to Alcorn State University to finish her bachelor's degree after my mother was born, I felt a sense of majestic wonder. Throughout my childhood, I lived at least 8 hours away from her home in Tallulah, Louisiana. Journeys to Tallulah would entail crossing rivers & counting countless striped freeway markers on the road to her. To accommodate my parents' work schedules, we would leave Indiana, Missouri, or Ohio in the afternoon and arrive in Louisiana at night. Grandma Jackson would stay up late to catch up with my parents, her laughter filling up every crevice of her home. With fascination, I remember watching her eat a caramel to balance her blood sugar – an act that confirmed that sweetness is sometimes necessary in a hard world.

What connected my grandmothers across distance & years were the brilliant smiles they gave the world. All these years later, I recall 70th birthday parties & 80th birthday parties with the worthy honorees - extending their love across the physical locations of the party, as well as across time. Knowing what I know now about the stunning pressures placed upon Black people in this nation, they must have been tired. Their warm demeanors, thoughtful instruction, and tireless faith demonstrated to me that hope moves in ascending and descending lines. Their love brought me here to this moment.

As you attended the sessions today, just as you wake up each weekday morning to serve young Texans, various reminders likely settled in about the unbelievably tough landscape that we inhabit in 2022. Critical race theory bans are on the books, school police budgets remain largely untouched, and library shelves are being cleared in an attempt to make LGBTQ kids feel some form of shame.

It is indeed a lot, though it is also the continuation of a long struggle. Just think about what my grandmothers endured for 70 & 92 years – what so many of our forebears, known & unknown, faced in a deeply unequal society. Their mere existence is inspiring in its perseverance and heartbreaking in its unnecessary pain.

However, also consider how far we've come. Tricia Hersey, better known as the Nap Bishop released *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* earlier this month. Since founding the Nap Ministry in 2016, Hersey has reached international recognition, but it was not without intense struggle. She speaks candidly of overdrawn bank accounts, a grueling graduate school schedule, and sheer exhaustion. I know exactly how she felt, as I expect many of you do. Despite the seemingly insurmountable struggles in front of her, she kept leaning into the message that rest is absolutely necessary to get us to the world that we hope to build together. She is now a *NYTimes* bestselling author, and that beautiful message is making its way across the world.

I took Hersey's wisdom as I recalled tender memories with my grandmothers and put the pen to paper. I sat down on my couch and ended up drifting off. I strolled throughout my neighborhood to think of the moving parts of this speech - and how they might relate to each other. Like Hersey, I marveled at what I'd overcome - nearly quitting law school, driving for Lyft and Uber while employed full-time, and surviving a pandemic alongside all of you. I dreamed as I did when I was child, knowing that my grandmothers were sleeping soundly in the other room during quiet summer nights and spirit-filled holiday celebrations. I took great happiness in realizing that, in a sense, they're still there.

As my grandmothers were born eleven years apart, they passed away eleven years apart. My paternal grandmother left us in 2007, and my maternal grandmother went home in 2018. Their physical absence leaves a gap, but I only need to think of them to be transported to their sides - memory can be a powerful manifestation of this year's Unconference theme. As you take on this imperative message of rejuvenation as

resistance, I want you to bring forth the people in your life, maybe recently or long departed, who breathed life into you. The family & community members who guided you through your education, held you with tenderness when you were hurt, and served as a conduit for your aspirations & dreams.

No one can do this alone. Y'all work incredibly hard on behalf of young people and their families - you put your body, mind, and soul into this labor. You're also human beings. Rest as a path to rejuvenation is what is required in the long haul. Ella Baker reminds us across time that we engage in the struggle in our epoch and then pass the torch along. Dr. Spencer shared this eternal wisdom during her poignant remarks this morning, and I reiterate it now.

Your individual contribution to our combined efforts will get us to a world in which there are no police officers in schools. A world in which racial justice, LGBTQ equality, and disability justice inform and guide the curriculum. A world in which teachers are properly compensated and commended as the experts they truly are. A world in which we get to breathe & rest & fully enjoy the life-giving relationships that carry us across the decades during our time on this planet.

May your good works, the eternal support of those who have poured into you, and our collective struggle take us to a place of abundant rest & deep community care. I will think of you and my grandmothers as we journey there.

Thank you for this incredible honor of delivering the Fall 2022 Unconference closing keynote once more. Love & solidarity to you all.

Andrew R. Hairston
Austin, Texas

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