

# Beginning With the Body

## Strategies on Building and Defining Safety in Unsafe Schools

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As an abolitionist teacher, why begin with the body? Because on the one hand, the body is the foundation from which we can deeply understand and meet our needs for safety, connection, and dignity. On the other hand, the school-prison nexus is not interested in meeting the needs of the people; rather, it is set on policing; controlling, and suppressing them.

As a former English teacher and current teacher educator, I continually witness and experience how unsafe and unsanctioned it is to be in your body and feel your feelings. Lama Rod Owens calls this *disembodiment*, where institutions are structured to reject, remove, and delegitimize the wisdom we have in our bodies that helps us meet our needs and advocate for justice, especially for those most disenfranchised and critical of schooling.<sup>1</sup> I experienced disembodiment when administrators scrutinized me for having “excessive facial expressions” during professional development or being too “emotionally invested” in students; I internalized it when I took on too many leadership roles and ignored my broken capacity. I saw disembodiment in school policies that forbid altar-building when we wanted to honor the loss of a student and banned end-of-year celebrations because grief and joy are supposedly barriers to “learning.”

To dismantle those practices and false narratives that make us believe our feelings and needs are disposable, we must find ways to return to our bodies and make a home for embodiment in our classrooms. Here, I share how the practice of getting in touch with our bodies in the classroom begins with

1. L.R. Owens, “Remembering Love: An Informal Contemplation on Healing,” in *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, ed. A.K. Williams, L.R. Owens, and J. Syedullah (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

myself and how I begin the school year inviting students' collective needs into our learning space. Throughout, I draw from embodiment—the rich sensations, stories, feelings, memories, survival and resilience strategies, and desires we carry in our bodies—to disrupt the violence of disembodiment in schools and cultivate a culture of authentic belonging, sustainability, and self-determination.

### Starting Within: Centering

My abolitionist teaching practice begins with my own body because I must intentionally excavate and interrupt the narratives of policing and punishment I have internalized within a white supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchal ableist society. Our needs for rest, for anger to be seen and heard, for support in the midst of struggle, and for space to practice joy are difficult to get in touch with and decipher, let alone communicate to others when we are conditioned by the school-prison nexus to focus on compliance, survival, and productivity instead. If we cannot be in relationship with our deepest desires, how can we build relationships with students that honor their own desires and agency?

The body can become a roadmap to return to ourselves and gain clarity on not just what we are fighting against, but what we truly want. Centering is a core practice I learned from generative somatics,<sup>2</sup> an organization that offers leadership trainings to strengthen movement work through embodied and social transformation. The goal of centering is to gain greater access to personal/collective power and values while navigating the pressures of personal life and movement work.

Using sensation, breath, and presence, there are four dimensions we practice in our bodies when we center. We keep our eyes open to remember that we are connected to and shaped by our world, while also having the ability to shape it back.

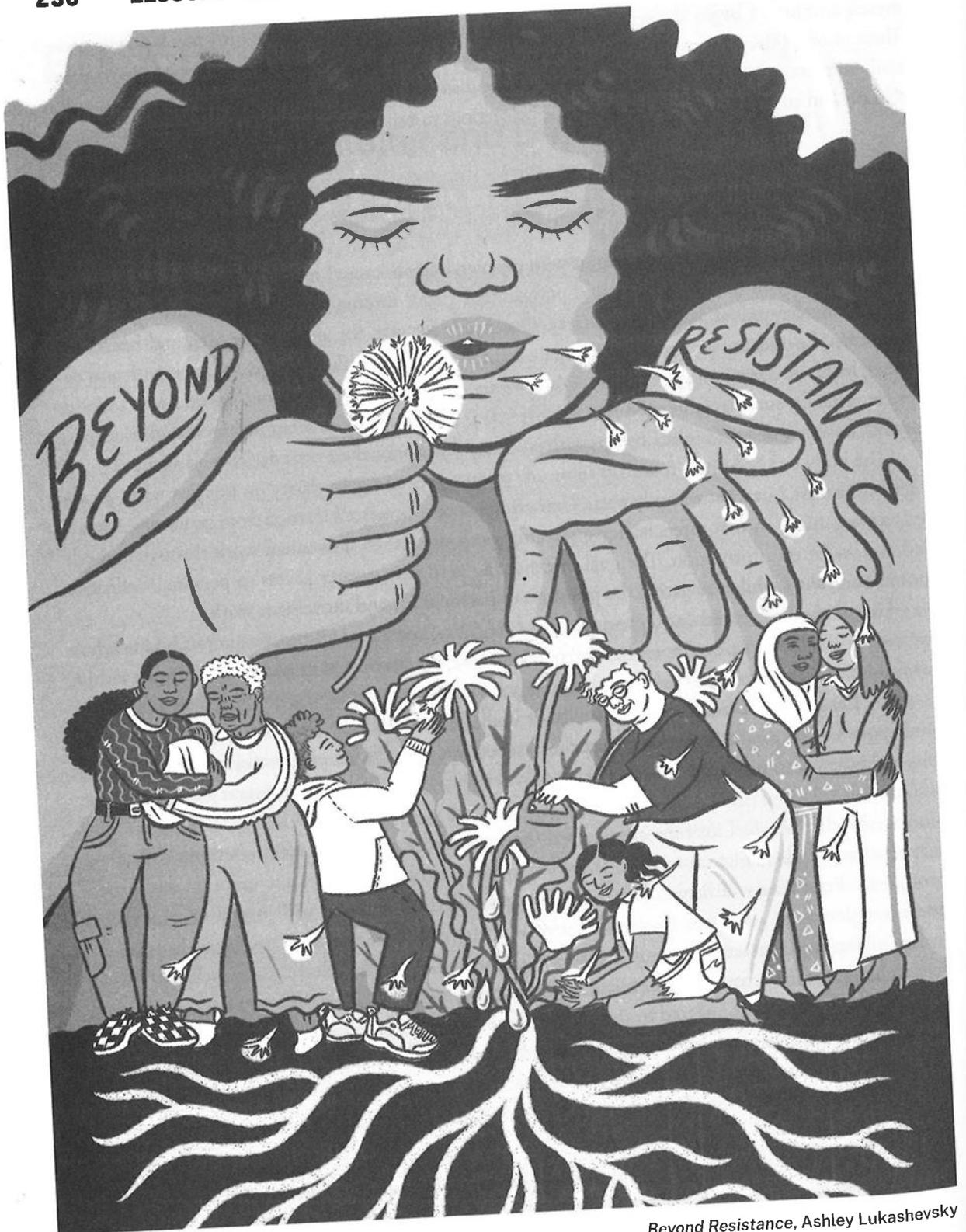
- o **Length:** We practice feeling our lower body planted into the earth while gently extending our upper body upwards. Getting in touch with our length helps us purposefully practice dignity in our bodies, disrupting the smallness we can carry from shame and the constant need to protect ourselves.

- o **Width:** We feel into the edges of our bodies and everything we feel in between. We experience what it feels like to connect to the space we take up, as well as the environment and people around us. Practicing width reminds us that it is possible to be present with ourselves while being present with others.

- o **Depth:** We practice sensing the backs and fronts of our bodies. Feeling our backs can help us sense what has come before us—our histories and ancestors—as well as who has our back. Feeling our fronts reminds us to be connected to the present moment.

- o **Purpose:** From a felt experience of length, width, and depth, we then ask ourselves, “Who and what do we care about?” This allows us to shift from reactionary unconscious habits to proactive and purposeful movement in the world.

2. For more information on generative somatics, go to <https://generativesomatics.org>, and see Staci Haines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2019).



Beyond Resistance, Ashley Lukashevsky

We can practice centering every day to multiple times a day to become more attuned to our present needs and align our values with our actions. Below is a description of how I have come to practice centering before I enter my classroom. I use the four dimensions to embody and teach from a place of wholeness.

*Just arriving on campus, I see several trees as a perfect place for me to practice centering. I put my bags down and look at a slender tree as my anchor point. I shift my hips side to side as I plant my feet into the ground. I take one cleansing breath in. Then out. Looking at the length of the tree from its roots to the top of its branches, I drop into my own length. I use my exhale to ease my shoulders down, while feeling my spine straighten and the crown of my head reach upwards. My slow breaths and the tree's quiet presence remind me that being in my length is not a performance, nor a race. Here, I breathe into dignity.*

*Next, I breathe into width. I look at the tree's farthest leaves to the left and to the right, then envision the space I take up in between my shoulders, my hips, and the outer corners of my feet. My calm breath reminds me that I can take up as much space as I need. I see the tree's branches reaching outwards, reminding me that I am also connected to those around me. Mindfully breathing, I widen into space and connection.*

*Then, I breathe into depth. I look at the tree's trunk, imagining its back and then circling to the front. I breathe into the back of my head, the small of my back, and the backs of my legs. Gratitude emerges, as I think of past students and fellow teachers behind me, and the rich history of struggle that informs who I am today. I breathe into the front of my body, relaxing my face, chest, and belly. From front to back, I deepen into the present, thankful for the past and hopeful for the future.*

*Breathing from center into my length, width, and depth, I invite my whole being into the present moment. As a woman, mother, and teacher of color, I have often approached my work from a place of scarcity, fearing that I am never doing enough and that I have to hide parts of myself to be seen as competent. It is through my body that I recognize how I sometimes clench my gut and jaw in school spaces where I don't feel safe. I can instead use my breath to soften those armored places in my body. I can learn how to balance attuning myself to my own needs while recognizing others'.*

*I become more conscious of my body's complex and contradictory strategies of protection and belonging, which help me become attuned to students' body language and the ways their desires for safety and connection often conflict with one another. Centering may not completely remove the clutter in my mind nor abolish the violence of schooling in one sweep. But it does help me stand in my wholeness without apology, so that I can form right relationships with students as we build a learning space that is more aligned with our whole humanity.*

After becoming adept at this practice, centering can also be incorporated into the classroom, perhaps starting class by centering into length as a way to transition into learning, or closing a community circle by centering into depth and gratitude. Before I invite students to center, we discuss why each centering exercise could be helpful in our lives. Then, I offer an image or quotation as an anchor or model the practice through simulations or reflections about my own practice. I guide students through the practice, asking them to settle into their bodies, locate their breath and any feelings or thoughts that are present, and use their breath to ground themselves, let go, and uncover anything that needs their attention.

With an abolitionist teaching praxis, it is important to balance meaning-making from our embodiment with bodily autonomy. The school-prison nexus uses discipline to make young people at the margins feel unsafe in their bodies so they can look outwards for authority and acceptance. Centering can become a practice for students to learn how to accept themselves and become authorities of their own bodies, as they choose whether to close or open their eyes and determine if they'd rather sit down, stand, or place their head on their desk. If they choose not to participate, the only requirement is that they be silent enough to respect everyone else's space to go inwards.

After students center, they write journal reflections about what they noticed in their practice and choose whether they would like to share their writing with their peers or teacher. Centering doesn't necessarily make us feel good; it helps us become present to what is. What soon becomes apparent are the ways in which we resist our own feelings and desires. I often have to remind myself to be centered when students' natural reactions to laugh, distract each other with goofy looks, or talk through the meditation start to frustrate me and other students who want quiet. It is a continual work in progress. The goal of centering, ultimately, is for students to feel present enough to cultivate belonging in their bodies, even if their environment dictates otherwise. From that inner sense of safety, we can approach learning with more choice, awareness, and capacity to create change.

#### Cultivating Solidarity: Collective Needs Activity

Many educators make the mistake of presuming that their classrooms are automatically safe spaces, even though schools in the United States have historically been built upon violence and continue to reinforce it through the school-prison nexus. How do we nurture safety in classrooms that are inherently unsafe for marginalized students?

This introductory activity, which I teach in the first week for middle, high school, and adult students, asks learners to determine for themselves what feels safe. Informed by non-violent communication practices,<sup>3</sup> I facilitate a dialogue about prior schooling experiences that helps students practice naming their feelings and needs in those given moments, which later helps them name needs that they have for our learning space. This activity replaces the school-prison logic of top-down discipline and punishment with an intentional move towards interdependence and collective accountability.

The Collective Needs Activity follows these steps:

1. Pass out two handouts: a Feelings list and a Needs list.<sup>4</sup>
2. Share the following discussion questions: *What is one negative schooling experience you remember? How did that experience make you feel? Underneath that feeling, what did you need in that moment?*

3. Meenadchi, *Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication* (New York: Co-Conspirator Press, 2019).

4. These handouts can be found in Meenadchi, *Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication* or <https://baynvc.org/list-of-feelings> and <https://baynvc.org/list-of-needs>.

Before having partners discuss, model an answer by sharing your own experience and referring to the Feelings and Needs Handouts. For example, I discuss how a math teacher used to re-arrange our seats based on our test scores, which made me feel embarrassed and incompetent. Underneath those feelings, I needed support instead of shaming. Remind students that they can choose what they want to share, and suggest choosing an experience that is medium in intensity. You can also ask students to refrain from naming individuals in their experiences to protect confidentiality (as sometimes naming teachers can derail the conversation).

After partners discuss, ask one or two students to share their experiences with the entire class. Assist students with naming their feelings and needs if necessary. Affirm students' feelings and needs, emphasizing that schools should be places where needs are met.

3. Transition to another set of questions: *What is a positive schooling experience you remember? How did you feel? What need was met?*

Again, model your own answer, naming your feelings and needs in that moment. Some students may not have any positive experiences, so you can also invite students to imagine a positive learning experience or think about an experience outside of school. After partners share, invite one or two students to share with the whole class.

4. Transition the discussion from past experiences to your current class. Remind students what the basic learning objectives are for the class, and explain that we will collectively determine what we need to meet those objectives.

5. Hand out three colored Post-its to each student and remind them that they have a list of needs in front of them. Ask students to answer each of the following questions on a differently colored Post-it:

- o *What is one need you can give to yourself to be successful in this class?*
- o *What is one need you request from your peers?*
- o *What is one need you request from the instructor?*

Ask students to place their Post-its on a poster for each category: self, peer, and instructor.

6. Invite a student to help you move the Post-its of each category into similar buckets—for example, if there are many duplicate needs for “humor” in the professor category, move those together on the poster so the class can see that their peers have shared needs. Afterwards, share the needs that students named for each category. If time permits, lead a discussion on why such needs are important to them.

7. Compile the collective needs lists into one poster or Powerpoint slide with which you can begin the class every day (see Figure 1). Remind students of the needs they have requested and explain how you have tailored the curriculum to meet those needs. Emphasize that this is a working document and that needs can be revised as time passes. A mid-semester check-in can be helpful in naming additional needs. When mediating class conflict or checking in with a student, use the list to reflect on how we can better address people's needs or repair ruptures in connection.

# CLASS COMMUNITY NEEDS

SELF	PEERS	TEACHER
- Freedom	- Respect	- Freedom
- Space	- Space	- Choice
- Love	- Support	- Space
- Respect	- Joy	- Love
- Support	- Humor	- Support
- To be understood	- Equality	- Respect
- To be seen	- Trust	- Understanding
- Trust	- Creativity	- Trust
- Joy		- Joy
- Humor		- Humor
- Inspiration		- Inspiration
- Beauty		- Hope
- Restroom		- Purpose

Example of Collective Needs List

Below is a description of what happened when I facilitated this activity and curiously unpacked subtle resistance from students:

*"Whenever I've done this community building activity, students are usually excited to talk about their experiences. But a lot of you look like you're not feelin' it. Do these questions about school even matter to you?"*

*A couple students look up from their phones, perhaps surprised by my sudden shift in tone, while others silently reflect on my pointed question.*

*Kaira chimes in, "Nobody really asks us how we feel about school. And school is just whatever, anyway." Students across the room nod agreeingly.*

*"Okay," I respond, appreciating Kaira's honesty. "Well, we're going to be talking about feelings a lot throughout the whole semester."*

*"I keep my emotions to myself," Malachi says suddenly. At first, I think his comment comes from defiance, but I notice his knee is bouncing rapidly up and down as he speaks. He appears nervous and courageous at the same time.*

*"Yeah, I think a lot of people do," I respond, "because schools often aren't safe for students. It makes*

sense to keep your feelings to yourself. For our next activity, I'm inviting you to share your personal needs with me and your classmates, so we can create more safety in here together."

I pass by Malachi and quietly say, "Thank you for sharing that," noticing that his jitters have started to dissipate.

As students finish sharing needs from me as their teacher, I wonder why folks are giggling and crowding around the whiteboard. Someone has added the word "restroom" to the list and placed a long row of checks after it.

"Hmm. Looks like it's important for someone to go to the restroom!" I say, looking around to see if I can figure out the source. I catch David coyly smiling back at me.

"Yeah, Miss! When you gotta go, you gotta go!" David quips, most of the class laughing.

While I was both annoyed and impressed by David's behavior, his commentary on restrooms also reminded me how heavily bodies and basic needs are policed in schools. As I learn later from Malachi and David, their responses to this activity stem from a history of mistrusting adults. Middle school police handcuffed and threatened David with juvenile detention after he accidentally got caught up in a student and teacher altercation. Despite his innocence, administrators forced David to apologize to his teacher in order to be allowed to return to class. These are the stories students come to us with as we learn how to undo carceral logic in our classrooms through radical honesty and unconditional love. With practice, students learned to advocate for themselves and each other, asking for space at the beginning of class or more time on an assignment. Though it takes much energy to gather students' needs, sift through resistance, and constantly reflect, it is worth the time to cultivate a space of solidarity.

### Curriculum as Freedom Dreaming

This activity can be modified for various learning spaces: What does safety look like in the context of a Physical Education classroom, for particular bodies? How have various content areas like Math made students feel incompetent, and how can we combat that? How can first-generation students in academia feel safer being their full selves?

Students can develop presentations, drawing from their experiences, texts like podcasts, film, and TV shows, and their own imaginations to freedom dream what schools can and should be. Abolitionist teaching calls us to "build practices and containers of resilience that not only support impacted communities in healing from harm, but invite us to imagine and practice being in community without systems of harm."<sup>5</sup>

5. Dignity and Power Now! Healing Justice Responders, *Healing Justice Toolkit* (The Justice Teams Network). <https://justiceteams.org/healing-justice>.