

*As if it Could be Otherwise: A Tribute
to Maxine Greene, December 23, 1917 –
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When I was invited to write this tribute – in a manner filled with playfulness and imagination that I believe Maxine herself would have loved – my first impulse was to decline. Who am I to provide such a tribute? I have never been a student of Maxine's. Only once did I have a personal exchange with her. Yes, I heard her speak in hotel ballrooms at conferences, finding myself equally enthralled by her words as by her extraordinary personality. Yes, I devoured her writing, reading, time and again, *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), hoping that my imagination would be soon released. But write a tribute? Surely not. Having read some of the magnificent tributes that have already been composed by those closest to her, it seemed trite, if not disrespectful, to add thoughts

of my own to mark her legacy. Teachers College of Columbia University issued a statement on the day of her death. It reads, in part:

Maxine Greene, the philosopher, author and professor emerita who was perhaps the most iconic and influential living figure associated with Teachers College, passed away on May 29th at the age of 96. Described by *The New York Times* as “one of the most important education philosophers of the past 50 years” and “an idol to thousands of educators,” Greene was regarded by many as the spiritual heir to John Dewey. Her work remains a touchstone for generations of TC faculty, alumni and students, as well as for scholars and artists around the world. “With the passing of Maxine Greene, Teachers College has lost an extraordinary mind and spirit embodying all that is best and most essential about our mission and work,” said TC President Susan Fuhrman. “Maxine’s brilliant vision of art as a means to awaken each of us to how we respond to the world will endure as her greatest legacy. She will be tremendously missed and deeply mourned.”

What else is there to say? But then I thought some more. It became apparent that I *could* write something about this remarkable teacher and scholar. Activist. Mother. Philosopher. Feminist. Wife. Public intellectual. Writer. Widow. New Yorker. Editor. Professor Emerita. Leader. Philanthropist.

For it has dawned on me, that as a scholar in the field of arts education, I am, in fact, a *bona fide* student of Maxine's. Through her writing, through her words, she has been my teacher for many decades, and in turn, I have explored her teachings with my own students. And so this

My slogan is 'wide-awakeness.' To be awake is to take risks, to see things that you probably would not want to see. We have to teach that—an awareness, a courage to see. Without it, we'll just be for profit, and not for meaning.

tribute to Maxine is from one of her unknown students. I am one of thousands upon thousands who never took a class from her, never took part in one of the legendary salons held in her apartment on Fifth Avenue, but a student nonetheless. A student who has mulled over quotations like these: "I want my students to be capable of outrage."

Woven throughout the tapestry of my writing, Maxine Greene is as familiar a reference as Dewey. Giroux. Freire. Bateson. Illich. *Releasing the Imagination* (1995) is the work I quote most frequently because it was there that I first encountered the notion that, "Imagination is the capacity to think of things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 19). But there are others books, too, including *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), *Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age* (1973), and *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (2001), that I reach to when trying to put my deepest and most troubling thoughts into words.

A week before she died, Tim Ignaffo, Early Childhood Program Manager at Teachers College, interviewed Maxine in her home. Tim reports that during the interview she was "funny, witty, and engaging."

He asked her if she was still teaching, to which she replied, “Oh yes, I never want to stop...” After discussing some of the prominent themes that find their way into most of her work – such as the consequences of public space, of being courageous as a scholar, and of the ways that the arts form connections – she closed by musing, “This is an important question: How do you wake people up?”

Not just *an* important question, but perhaps *the* important question as we face colossal challenges at a global scale. Friend and professor Janet Miller (2010) wrote that “The gift that Maxine Greene has offered and

I'll tell you the secret to good teaching: make possible an experience without predetermining what that experience will be.

continues to confer on the field of education writ large is her passion for forging ways to ‘come together to act on the possibility of repair,’ a possibility that she herself so magnificently has envisioned, embodied and enacted.”

I would venture to suggest that the answer to Maxine’s last question is contained in her life’s work. As her students, we would do well to examine her words again, and then to do all that we can to set the conditions for our own students, and for ourselves, to have the courage to be in a state of ‘wide-awakeness’ as we go forth and imagine this precious world, as if it could be otherwise.

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