

## The Most Important Thing I Teach My Students Isn't On The Syllabus (abridged)

Frank Bruni, *The New York Times*, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024

I warn my students. At the start of every semester, on the first day of every course, I confess to certain passions and quirks and tell them to be ready: I'm going to repeat one phrase more often than any other: "It's complicated." They'll become familiar with that. And that's because I'm standing before them not as an ambassador of certainty or a font of unassailable verities but as an emissary of doubt. I want to give them intelligent questions, not final answers. I want to teach them how much they have to learn — and how much they will always have to learn.

I'd been on the faculty of Duke University and delivering that spiel for more than two years before I realized that it was about humility, and that humility is the antidote to grievance.

We live in an era defined and overwhelmed by grievance — by too many Americans' obsession with how they've been wronged and their insistence on wallowing in ire.

The Jan. 6 insurrectionists were unhumble. They decided that they held the truth, no matter all the evidence to the contrary. It's no accident that they were acting in the service of Donald Trump, whose pitch to Americans from the very start was a strikingly — even shockingly — unhumble one. "I alone can fix it," he proclaimed in his 2016 speech accepting the Republican Party's nomination for president.

In government, most meaningful success hinges on teamwork and significant progress requires consensus. Governing, as opposed to demagoguery, is about earning others' trust and cooperation. Exhibiting a willingness to listen to and to hear them goes a long way toward that.

Humble politicians don't insist on one-size-fits-all answers when those aren't necessary as a matter of basic rights and fundamental justice. Humble activists don't either. The campaign for same-sex marriage — one of the most successful social movements of recent decades — showed that progress can be made not by shaming people, not by telling them how awful they are, but by suggesting how much better they could be. Marriage-equality advocates emphasized a brighter future that they wanted to create, not an ugly past that they wanted to litigate. They also wisely assured Americans that gay and lesbian people weren't trying to explode a cherished institution and upend a system of values, but instead wanted in.

That's consistent with the message delivered by Loretta Ross, a longtime racial justice and human rights advocate. Troubled by the frequent targeting and pillorying of people on social media, she urged the practice of calling *in* rather than calling *out* those who've upset you. "Call-outs make people fearful of being targeted," she wrote in a guest essay for Times Opinion. Instead, she advised, engage them. If you believe they need enlightenment, try that route, "without the self-indulgence of drama," she wrote.

She was recognizing other people's right to disagree — to live differently, to talk differently. Pluralism is as much about that as it is about a multiracial, multifaith, multigender splendor.

We all carry wounds, and some of us carry wounds much graver than others. We confront obstacles, including unjust and senseless ones. We must tend to those wounds. We must push hard at those obstacles. But we mustn't treat every wound, every obstacle, as some cosmic outrage or mortal danger.

While grievance blows our concerns out of proportion, humility puts them in perspective. While grievance reduces the people with whom we disagree to caricature, humility acknowledges that they're every bit as complex as we are — with as much of a stake in creating a more perfect union.