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Tina Thompson: My Superhero

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Abstract

My relationship with Dr. Tina Thomspson, my PhD Advisor, mentor, colleague, and dear friend inspired this short story. Here, I share several of the lessons that I learned from Tina about *listening*, *validation*, and *giving* in teaching and in research. I use the Superhero Pose or Power Pose as a metaphor to pay tribute to Tina's presence in my own work with students and with learners.

Power Posing

A few years ago, a TEDGlobal talk began circulating around my teaching circles. In the video piece, Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist at Harvard Business School, suggests that before going to a job interview, giving a public speech, or taking an exam, everyone should spend two minutes “power posing.” In her talk, Cuddy explained that “our bodies change our minds.”

And I so I immediately thought of the pose I assume before I teach: The one inspired by my mentor, colleague, and dear friend Tina Thompson. My power pose is just a little bit different than the archetypal one that Amy Cuddy recommends. In fact, it is more like a meditative visualization. It has three primary elements: *listening*, *validation*, and *giving*. Amy Cuddy's recommended pose resembles Wonder Woman and is also called a "superhero stance" – hands on hips, legs hip-width apart and knees locked, gaze direct and straight forward. My pose is a bit more subtle. You might not even recognize it as powerful in the typical way. In fact, I am most often sitting when I power pose. Sometimes this happens in front of my computer, sometimes I do it in front of my class, and sometimes I am sitting in an airplane seat on the way to a conference. If you could see me, you might think I was meditating or practicing yoga, not embodying a superhero. My eyes close, my breathing becomes even and deep and my posture, my shoulders square, and I well up on the inside with purpose. I imagine myself becoming like Tina. I am trying to let go of the worries and fears I still have about teaching. I am trying to let go of my agenda. I am trying to open myself to what Tina has called 'being there,' which is not simply being present but embodying openness. To me, that is the most powerful presence of all.

I derived my power pose, in part, from a saying we had among friends in the Art Education PhD program at Penn State: "What would Tina do?" This was a pop culture mash-up extraordinaire, an amalgam of the WWJD bracelets that were popular in the mid-aughts and another superhero reference, to Batman's Bat Signal. Unlike other DC heroes, Batman has no superhuman powers. A scientist and detective at heart, he relies on his own research and knowledge to solve mysteries and problems. Whenever we were having a teaching, research, or personal crisis or concern, we would project our Bat Signal (TT) and wherever in the world Tina Thompson was, she would seemingly instantly respond. Whether she was giving a keynote in Taiwan, navigating the infamously spotty internet in the Arts Cottage, or at the lake with her family, she would take the time to respond. And even though her responses came so quickly, they felt neither hurried nor contrived. We savored them. Each word was chosen so carefully, and sometimes written even more beautifully. We could see the individual strokes that formed those words with such thought and such care. It was exactly what we needed. Like Batman, Tina solved the mystery every single time.

And now that I am a professor and a mentor, too, every time I teach a class, give a talk, visit a new student teacher, or even respond to a particularly tricky email message, I do my TT power pose. I've even done it when I find myself too hurried in the line at the grocery store. I do it more than ever now that I am a parent to a toddler and a baby.

Listening

As I shared, the first element of my power pose is *listening*. Not just listening but the *practice* of listening – the pedagogy of listening. The pedagogy of listening is an almost meditative, deeply connected, intentional, and ethical practice – what Tina has called ‘being there.’ For anyone who has tried to meditate, you might recall how difficult it can be to truly quiet your churning mind. To add listening to this quieting practice requires even another suspension of oneself, a giving, to focus truly on another. As Carlina Rinaldi has explained, “Listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and at the same time a suspension of our judgments and above all, our prejudices; it requires openness to change” (2001, p. 81). So, while a traditional superhero stance might defend, my TT power pose *absorbs*.

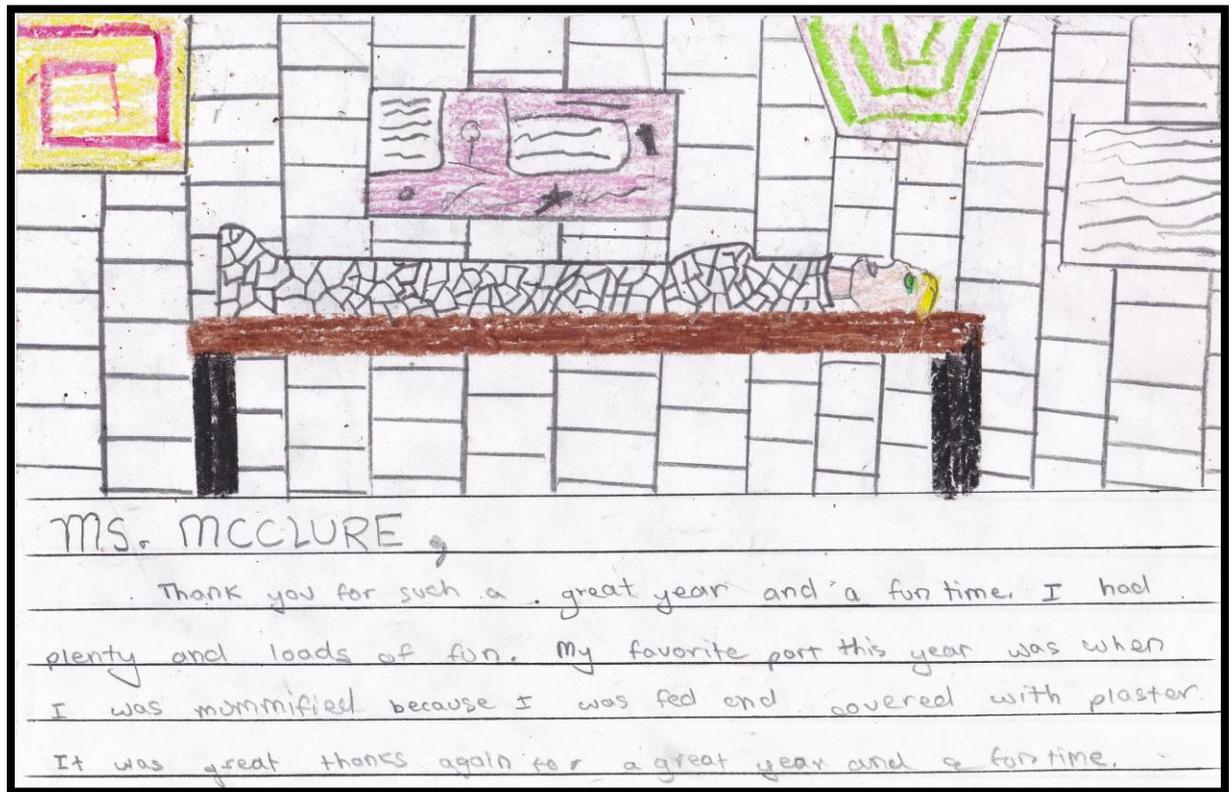
communities, and the development of inexpensive (or free) easy to use social networking services now widely available on the World Wide Web. On-line social networking includes the creation of and interaction within electronic groups—e.g., e-mail, list serves, bulletin boards, Internet Relay Chats (IRCs), and Instant Messaging (IMing)—and on Web sites (including Web pages, profiles, blogs, and digital portfolios).

When I began teaching young children art I would get very excited about the myriad of ‘cool’ things that I wanted my students to do. But, since the kids didn’t seem as excited as I was about what I had asked them to do, I began to ask them what they would like to do.

Sometimes it overlapped a little with what I wanted, and sometimes it didn’t. But one day one of my favorite fourth grade students, Rex, had a pretty good suggestion. He wanted to become a mummy. He suggested that we wrap him up like a mummy, and make a fancy Egyptian mask (they were studying Egypt in their classroom). Rex was the perfect student to wrap. He was smart, savvy, adventurous, and fearless. With the confidence only a first-year art teacher could have, I had no qualms about wrapping a ten-year-old boy head to toe like a mummy! HAHA!



So, back to the mummy. We researched how to wrap a mummy. Someone had donated some plaster-soaked wraps (the kind used for casts) to the art classroom so the kids and I decided that we could use those to wrap up Rex. We didn't want to put them right on his skin so we used garbage bags as a barrier. And we covered him up in garbage bags and wrapped him tight. The other kids had snacks and drinks, and a grand old time. We did not account for the fact that Rex might experience a touch of claustrophobia when the plaster began to warm and to shrink to his body. If I had my TT signal then, I would have launched it immediately. That was a moment when I needed the power pose. But, that was also a moment that changed the course for me. It was a moment where I became not a teacher, but a collaborator, with my students. The relationship changed – we were solving problems together, trouble-shooting, developing hypothesis, stretching skills, learning *together*, and having SO MUCH FUN even though we were a little bit frightened (I was actually terrified but it was somehow exhilarating at the same time) about the outcome. Rex survived, and I was hooked for life.



Validation

Now, Rex is twenty-something and recently set a Guinness World Record for running the world's fastest half New York marathon in a business suit. I'm glad his pioneering spirit and panache remains intact. He likely has no idea the influence he's had on my life and on my work. This brings me to the key element of my power pose is *validation*: to make sure that the students with whom I am working know just how meaningful our interactions are to me in the moments that we share them. It's hard to explain what this looks like in teaching and in research, but I know what it *feels* like, and I hope that my students do, too. When I was Tina's student, I always felt *this*. No matter how trivial I felt my concern, worry, or fear was, Tina considered it with care. This is another aspect of 'being there,' of *listening*.

A few months after I nearly suffocated Rex, I first met Tina Thompson. It was August of 2003. I had come to Penn State to pursue my PhD in Art Education, after both learning that the feeling that I had that day with the fourth graders in my classroom was a *thing* and that as the newest and youngest art teacher in my district I was put on a 'catastrophe list,' which meant that should funding fall short, it would take my position with it. My colleagues suggested that it was a good time to consider a PhD. And so I did.

Beginning in the historic doctoral program at Penn State (where Lowenfeld had taught!) after my first year of teaching art intimidated me. I felt young, naïve, and powerless. Even a few scholars I admired in the field had told me I would need to work hard to be taken seriously. I would need a power pose. My voice, my presence (or lack thereof), my age, my interest in young children – all of these qualifiers threatened my scholarly authority. A traditional superhero stance wouldn't work for me but I needed a power pose that highlighted my non-superhuman abilities. I needed Batman.

Tina knew I needed some additional teaching experience. Shortly after my move from Tucson, Arizona to State College, Pennsylvania, Tina came to pick me up in her Batmobile and took me to a job interview at a small Catholic elementary school in nearby Bellefonte. Just like Rex, the children who I encountered at St. John's became my co-conspirators. But, unlike before, I now had a mentor and a confidante – a Batman to my Robin – to support my work and to infuse me with what my Kindergarten students called “circles of power” as they played “The Most Powerful Transformer.”

Giving

And that leads me to the third and final element of my power pose: *Giving*. It may be a cliché, but power comes with responsibility. As scholars, we are often taught to share our work. This sharing implies the work is *ours*. So, I like to think of what I learned from Tina about sharing is actually about *giving*. I think of this giving as a kind of permission. A giving of ideas, a giving of validation, a giving of listening. When I share research done with sharing with my students, I try to think about giving them permission to listen and to acknowledge. Giving them openness to question and to wonder and to not know. And power given with the most vulnerable of collaborators – very young children – comes with an added ethical element. For me, inspired by Tina, this is the responsibility to share widely, with deepest respect, and utmost openness. And, that is why I have chosen to share my brief story celebrating Dr. Tina Thompson with you today. I hope that sometime soon, as you might encounter another or recall a difficulty, that you will launch your TT signal with confidence, take a few deep, centering breaths, and use your powers to absorb all the beauty and wonder that surrounds you with tender care, tenacious intellect, and richest love.

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About the Author

Marissa McClure is Art Education Program Coordinator and Women's and Gender Studies Affiliate Faculty at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Tina Thompson served as her PhD Advisor at Penn State University. As a researcher, artist, and teacher, Marissa is interested in contemporary theories of child art, constructions of childhood and children and visual and media culture, community-based art education, feminist theory, and curriculum inquiry, theory, and design. Tina's work inspired Marissa throughout her time in early childhood art classrooms, where she worked with young children as co-researchers.

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