

Transparency, Vulnerability, and Collective Action

Hannah Alpert-Abrams
NeMLA 2021

I'm going to be talking about something a little different. I'm going to talk about feelings.

This is a difficult time for workers in and around higher education. Since last summer, I've been asking humanities workers to share their feelings, and while the specifics have changed, the overwhelming consensus is that working in higher education during a pandemic is exhausting, scary, outrageous, and sad.

This week, which marks a full year of pandemic response for many of us, has been particularly difficult for me, and maybe for you as well. I am so exhausted.

I'm way too exhausted, to be honest, to write a talk about the future of higher education. So I did the obvious thing, and asked my tarot deck for guidance.

For those who might not know, tarot is a tool for asking questions about the world and seeking answers within yourself. You draw a card from a deck and use that card as a guide to answer your question.

The question I asked was: what should I focus on during today's talk?

The card I pulled was the Assistant Professor. In traditional tarot, this card represents temperance, alchemy, and the balance of things. Because I drew the card reversed, it can be understood as a warning that the way we are feeling and the way we are acting are not in alignment.

So I think what this card was telling me is that in speaking with you, I should focus on what it means to align our fears and desires with our professional work.

The way I'm going to do that is by talking about, in the words of feminist literary scholar Mimi Winick, strategies and tactics for creating personal and institutional change.

When I say change, I'm thinking of revolutions. I am inspired by Julian Chambliss's work on Black science fiction, where he argues that in a context where the future feels bleak and violent, alternative visions of the future are crucial to survival.

I am also inspired by the work of the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, which offers guidance for implementing change when the need is so great that change feels both overwhelming and impossible. They're talking about things like prison abolition and climate change and racial justice, but their work applies to higher education too.

As founder Adrienne Maree Brown says, one of the most important things activists can do is envision the future we want to create.

So when I say I want to talk about change, I'm speaking about the transformation of all of higher education from a space of exploitation to an institution that serves our collective good by educating for justice, equity, and healing.

And when I say strategies and tactics, I mean that none of us can afford to wait for higher education to remake itself. If you are on the job market now, you don't have time to wait until higher education becomes a system that will give you what you need.

It may be tempting, in this context, to turn inward and to try to save ourselves. But I hope you will consider turning that grief and anger and disappointment outwards instead.

If we do that, I believe we can create spaces where individuals experience less suffering in isolation, and more collective transformation.

I want to give you two examples of what this can look like.

The first example is what I've been calling *shared vulnerability*. Shared vulnerability has to do with creating spaces where it is safe for us to be outraged and overwhelmed and angry and hopeful together.

An example of how I've implemented shared vulnerability in my academic community is [the tarot deck I showed you earlier](#), which is a project developed by the Visionary Futures Collective and painted by the artist Claire Chenette.

We designed the deck at a time when we were all feeling scared about the future, about the job market and the collapse of tenure protections and the role of universities in spreading disease. I now use it in many of my professional interactions, and it's created something extraordinary: a safe way to be vulnerable with colleagues as we talk about things that are often scary and sad.

The second example is what I've been calling *radical transparency*. Radical transparency has to do with using information that has been kept secret to empower community members to take action for their own futures.

If you're an assistant instructor, an example of radical transparency might be sharing your salary with the undergraduate students in your classroom. If you're a student, it might be writing a job description for faculty advisors. If you're faculty, it might mean sharing a more honest story of your own professional journey so your students can understand that they are not alone.

One way that we've used radical transparency with the Visionary Futures Collective is through the [job market support network](#), which is an online repository of job materials. I started the job

market support network after a faculty member, tasked with advising me on the job market, instead offered a litany of racist and classist feedback about my appearance. I realized that we could not trust individual faculty to use their platforms to support equity in the profession. So I built a repository where anyone in the world could access information about how to seek a job in and beyond the tenure track.

This isn't particularly innovative or experimental, and it's not a ton of work. But I think it's helped a lot of people feel more confident and capable as they navigate their careers.

So, to conclude.

I wrote this talk primarily for anyone in the audience who is trying to imagine yourself into a new professional future under very difficult conditions.

Lately I've been thinking about something Kathleen Fitzpatrick wrote early in the pandemic: that our universities have to earn the right to survive.

I honestly don't think they have. I think the choices of university administrators during this pandemic have made clear to me that they are not prioritizing our collective good, or their own educational mandate. I don't think it's our job to help them survive.

But I do think that we deserve to survive, and even thrive.

Wherever you are now in your professional life, I hope your own future is one that allows you to build community and foster relationships built on transparency, vulnerability, and a shared sense of justice. And I hope you are able to participate in the work of [envisioning a better future for higher education](#), so that we can build a future worth fighting for.

And I hope you'll join us tomorrow for [academic tarot happy hour](#), so we can talk about some of these futures together.