

Godfrey Vincent

The Professor and the Student:
Lessons from My Experiences with Rod Bush

I. Introduction

Rod Bush (1945-2013) was the most quintessential revolutionary/activist/scholar I have ever met in my lifetime. He was very instrumental in my intellectual development not only at St. John's University but at the New School for Social Research and also at Morgan State University.

In academia, there are many professors who are very progressive; however, they are not revolutionaries. Rod was a revolutionary because he was actively involved in the Black Liberation struggles of oppressed peoples not only in the U.S., but globally. This characteristic meant a great deal to me as a student because there was a professor who identified with my world view. As an activist, Rod used his experiences to teach us how to develop into better activists and led by example on the St. John's University, Queens' campus.

As one of Rod Bush's many students, I witnessed firsthand the

hours he spent doing research on his many lectures, papers, and books. He knew his subject matter and also sought ways to introduce new paradigms to challenge existing theories in the field of sociology.

In terms of my intellectual development, Rod introduced me to a new world of scholarship during my undergraduate years. He introduced me to books and scholars that I read for the first time. Secondly, he introduced me to the Left Forum where I met many intellectuals from various races and classes. He ensured that we spoke every day about critical issues affecting oppressed people. This spurred me to read more and engage in research beyond the recommended readings of the course.

In this chapter I reflect on Rod Bush's praxis during the time of our association. However, before I delve into these issues, I will provide a short biography so that you, the reader, can contextualize how and why Rod's ways of teaching and mentoring were so special and had such great impact.

My name is Godfrey Vincent and I am sixty-one years old. Presently I am an Associate Professor of History in the Department of History and Political Science and former Interim Chair of the department at Tuskegee University in Alabama. But I haven't always been in this position.

In 1997, I migrated from Trinidad and Tobago to the United States and took up residence in Brooklyn, New York. Prior to this I had been a secondary school teacher at several Private Secondary Schools from 1981 to 1997. I taught Caribbean history, Social Studies, Principles of Business and Economics. As a Community activist in the Petit-Valley-Diego Martin/Carenage/St.James/Maraval area¹, I was part of People's Link, a network of activists that sought to bring about transformative change in our various localities. Moreover, I was a member of the United Labor Front.² The ULF was an amalgam of radical trade unions and community activists that entered politics to challenge Eric Williams and the prevailing Development paradigm.

1. These are communities in Trinidad and Tobago.

2. The United Labor Front was an amalgamation of Progressive Trade Unions, Political Activists and Community Activists.

It contested the 1976 General election and won twelve seats in the Parliament. However, the movement was short-lived as it fractured due to internal strife. With the demise of the ULF, the Committee for Labor Solidarity (CLS)³ became the new vanguard that prepared the people for a new working class political party. This political party became the Movement of Transformation.⁴

Furthermore, I was a former Vice-Chair Person of Youth Voice, and former President of Simeon Road Superpan⁵ and Coordinator of CLS West, and a former member of the Summit of Peoples' Organizations (SOPO). Additionally, I am a Rapso artiste⁶ (Cymande), a former Shop Steward of DC 37 Local 2054, and a delegate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Therefore, I arrived in New York with a "filled slate." I had a radical world view, but didn't possess a university degree and the training and exposure to scholarship and ideas that would eventually bring me to a relationship with Rod. I met Rod Bush on my journey toward my first degree, during which he played an instrumental role even in the attainment of that achievement. There were many challenges along the way and Rod's role in navigating them was central.

II. Revolutionary Love and Respect

In fall 2000, I took a sociological theory class with Professor William DiFazio. At the end of the semester, he asked if I knew Professor Rod Bush, to which I replied "no." Professor DiFazio then suggested that I should meet him. The following day, I went to the Department of Sociology in St. John Hall and introduced myself to Dr. Bush. We had a brief conversation and he suggested that we have a longer meeting at the end of the week. I returned to his office on Friday, and we had a very long discussion about many topics. Dr. Bush revealed that he was going through a tough, emotional period because of the death

3. The Committee for Labor Solidarity was launched in 1980.

4. MOTION became the Political Party that was created by the CLS.

5. Superpan was a steel band. The Steel pan is an instrument that is original to Trinidad and Tobago.

6. Rapso is the spoken word that is used with musical instruments.

of his daughter, Sojourner Truth Bush the previous March in a car accident. From the tone of his voice and his facial expression, I knew that he loved her very dearly and that her death left a significant void in his life.

In time as our friendship developed and deepened, I understood that Rod had a sincere love for people. Often in the revolutionary movement, we shout the slogan "Power to the People," but we less frequently show our love for the people around us in our daily interaction. Rod understood that having love for people in general and in particular is an essential revolutionary characteristic.

One way that he demonstrated this love was by the relationships he built with the receptionists who worked in the various departments in St. John's Hall. These women were white Catholic women of Irish ancestry. In his many conversations with them, Dr. Bush learned that they were being exploited by the university in numerous ways including campus policies, practices, and benefits. The university administration, under the leadership of President Harrington, did not remunerate them adequately for their service, and they felt under-appreciated for the critical role they play at the University and in relationship with students, faculty and administrators.

These women reached out to Dr. Bush because he listened and empathized with their plight. Oftentimes faculty and Administrators can be dismissive or condescending toward people in this sector, but Rod viewed them as full contributors to the educational community. Even as he dealt with his own personal loss, Rod made time to listen to these women and showed them love and respect, patience and generosity. They knew that Rod would keep their conversations in confidence and they trusted him.

Through these interactions, Rod demonstrated that love transcends age, gender, religious persuasion, political affiliation, race and class. He knew that love meant action and not just talk. He understood that relationships are central to living a meaningful life and demonstrated the power of love. By speaking consistently with the receptionists, he earned their respect and admiration. By extending his love to them, he not only taught them how to resist oppression but also how to

build community. This provided a vivid model for members of the Sociology club who witnessed love in deed.

III. Risk and Sacrifice

The year 2000 was an intense period of struggle over the proliferation of sweatshops globally. St. John's University was caught up in the nexus of this practice because of the commercial agreement it had signed with Nike for athletic team apparel.

Around this period, students had just formed a Sociology Club, and Dr. Bush had become our faculty mentor. As one of our first initiatives, we linked up with other students across campus to wage struggles over the University's Nike contract and in turn, their support of sweatshops. The University administration brought in a non-governmental organization NGO that worked for Nike to ensure that workers' rights were protected, but students were not convinced that this represented what was actually happening.

Then, the administration sought to pacify us, but we became more determined to stand up for the exploited workers at Nike. This was also a very vulnerable time because Professor Bush was up for reappointment. While members of the Sociology Club were determined to continue the struggle, we knew that there might be a backlash against him, from the administration for supporting the students.

We met with Professor Bush on this matter, and despite his personal circumstances, he insisted that we couldn't abandon the struggle and that we must continue with the protest. While he assured us that he would be fine, deep down inside, I was fearful for him knowing that he didn't receive tenure from Seton Hall—his last employer—for taking clear and explicit positions about issues of social justice. The members of the Sociology Club decided that we must protect and defend Professor Bush at all cost if the administration targeted him.

In the end, the administration came down hard on one administrator, who was fired and also on the Sociology Club, which was placed on sanction though they did not sanction Dr. Bush.

Throughout this crisis, Rod never wavered in his conviction that resistance to oppression is critical for freedom, justice, and equality for all.

While maintaining his job was important for him and his family, Professor Bush stood in the midst of the gathering storm of reaction and defended the actions of the students and the Sociology Club. In the end, he obtained his tenure despite his strong stance. Through it all, and despite great risk, he maintained solidarity and upheld his principles.

IV. Stepping up

The spring of 2004 was a very difficult period for me emotionally and financially. I had no money to complete my final semester before graduation. I had registered for my classes and began attending only to discover that the University had dropped me from all of my courses due to non-payment. My financial aid was exhausted and I had no funds to pay for the tuition.

Immediately, I spoke with Dr. Bush, and we began to strategize a plan on how to obtain the funds. First, he told me to write letters to famous Black celebrities like Danny Glover and Oprah Winfrey. Mr. Glover responded by saying that he had no funds. Oprah didn't respond. When that failed, Dr. Bush informed me that he would speak to the Provost, Dr. Bonaparte. A week after Dr. Bush's meeting, I received a call from the Provost's Office saying that Dr. Jeffrey Fagen, Dean of St. John's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences would award me a \$10,000 scholarship to complete my degree.

When I received the news, it was indeed a day of great rejoicing. I informed Dr. Bush about the award, and he too celebrated the good news. His offering of solidarity in that time of crisis and his efforts toward obtaining these funds meant that I was able to graduate on time and apply to graduate school. Like other scholars on the Left, Dr. Bush wrote and taught about the topic of solidarity. But when my situation arose, Dr. Bush "practiced what he preached."

This example is a living testimony that he was a man of action and

not just another arm-chair revolutionary—someone who in times of crisis steps aside or lays low. Rod Bush demonstrated otherwise. Not only did he show solidarity, but also he gave guidance and was a man of action, indeed.

V. Mentorship

I graduated from Morgan State University in spring 2011 with a doctorate in history during the “Great Recession” that crashed the American economy and put many people out of their homes and out of work. From 2009 to 2011, I was a fellow at James Madison University (JMU), and the thought of not finding a tenure track job or even a job at all preoccupied my thoughts.

From late 2010 to the time I graduated, I sent out more than a dozen applications for tenure track jobs and post-doctorates. Every reply came back negative. I had one more semester on my contract at JMU and began wondering what would come next. The Department of History at JMU wanted to hire me for a full-time job, but because the state’s Governor and Legislator slashed funding for higher education, it could not. At first, I considered remaining at JMU and taking up part-time teaching, but that option was not available. Next, I decided to return to Baltimore and teach at Morgan State. The question arose where I would live in Baltimore. Upon deeper reflection, I decided to return to New York and take my chances. However, before I left Virginia, I applied for a job at Tuskegee University.

After graduation, I returned to Virginia and then went to New York to spend time with my brother. While there, I met with Rod and Melanie Bush and they helped me map out a plan for how I could obtain part-time teaching jobs. I listened very attentively to every plan of action they laid out.

While discussing these issues at lunch in Manhattan, I received a call from an administrator at Tuskegee University informing me that I was a candidate for the tenure track job in the Department of History and Political Science. Once again I deferred to Rod and Melanie about the job. Even though my heart was set on returning to New York to

live, they both encouraged me to fly to Tuskegee University for the job interview.

Offering this sort of sound guidance and support is a trait of a revolutionary. They could have simply told me to follow my heart and remain in New York. But they didn't, like true friends they guided me to the best alternative and to the idea that taking one step doesn't preclude others in the future. I think this is the true nature of radical revolutionary politics because it connects to the heart and soul of individuals. It connects in ways that we can't get from reading a book. The ability of radical friends to sit and talk in ways that connect deep into the regions of one's soul is very important. Often as revolutionaries we dismiss this spiritual bonding and connection. This is rather salient because it expresses how Rod wants us to care for each other.

Rod Bush was a remarkable individual, professor, friend, and mentor. From the time we bonded, he was always there for me. As an individual, Rod was a remarkable human being. From close up, I saw how he treated people with respect and dignity. He never talked down to people and was always willing to interact with people at their level. As a professor, Rod spent many hours with his students preparing us for the next level. He believed in us and ensured that we took up the challenge to move to the next intellectual phase. As a friend and mentor, he was there for me in my many crises, challenges, failures, and successes. For example, he traveled to Baltimore on March 2011 to attend my dissertation defense, and we reunited on that day after some time apart.

During the years of our meaningful friendship, he exemplified what a true revolutionary should be. He showed love in any environment that fostered fear and separation. Moreover, Rod taught me the true meaning of resistance, which stands in the face of reactionary forces even at the risk of dire consequences. He showed solidarity when help and support were truly needed. Finally, he offered guidance in and out of the classroom when few were willing to so do.

VI. Conclusion

I do hope this essay sheds light on Rod Bush as a man of action and not mere words. Here are the lessons that we can draw from and shape according to our own approaches and actions:

- **Dedication.** Rod dedicated his life to the movement by foregoing many material benefits. This dedication inspired many of us to pursue intellectual pursuits, activism, conventional politics, and community engagement;
- **Commitment.** Rod spent his entire life committed to a struggle that he knew will be coming to fruition. He never wavered in understanding that his praxis meant that when he passed on, others would take up the mantle;
- **Scholarship.** Rod has left us a body of scholarship through which we can continue his legacy by deepening his theoretical frameworks and keeping alive his many publications;
- **Legacy.** Rod was on the Board of the Left Forum. Let us organize an annual forum in Rod's memory.

Rod Bush's journey on this earth came to an abrupt end in 2013. In his lifetime, he was a change agent and impacted the lives of individuals, communities, and nations. As a student and friend, I can affirm that his praxis has helped to shape my worldview. He has implanted in us "We Are Not What We Seem." We are the possible. We are the struggle and the ensuing victory. We are the toppling of White Supremacy and the toppling of symbols of oppression. We are the Radical vision of a transformative society truly based on "justice and liberty for all."

Because of my association with Rod, the whirlwind of revolutionary spirit in me is alive and well.

Abstract

This essay by Godfrey Vincent, titled “The Professor and the Student: Lessons from my Experiences with Rod Bush,” is a chapter in the anthology *Rod Bush: Lessons from a Radical Black Scholar on Liberation, Love, and Justice*, edited by Melanie E. L. Bush, and co-edited by Rose M. Brewer, Daniel Douglas, Loretta Chin, and Robert Newby (2019). Rod Bush, a former Professor of Sociology at St. John’s University, Queens Campus, spent his life in the revolutionary struggle in the hope to create an egalitarian world. Vincent and Bush connected on this journey where Bush became Vincent’s mentor. In this chapter Godfrey Vincent reflects on Rod Bush as the quintessential professor, revolutionary, and mentor.

Author

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