

Loretta Chin

Rod Bush: Passing the Torch for Love,
Liberation, and Freedom

If life were a trial and test of who we are in this world, then Dr. Roderick D. Bush would be a champion. His untimely passing places before us the realization of the meaning and impact of his life, one of high standards for living a life of love and liberation. Those of us who had the privilege to know and learn from him have a special responsibility to carry on this legacy and, by extension, continue to bring forward the power of his teachings to light the way for others.

I came to know Rod Bush through his wife and soulmate, Melanie (Mel). For all the years that I have known them, there was not one without the other. For many years we have traveled together as close companions on this journey of life. Although we led very different lives, we were at the same time in pursuit of a similar goal: to make the world a better place, as we all could change it for the better or worse in our everyday words, deeds, and actions.

Along the way, we learned so much about our world and our place in it. It's a beautiful world filled with many wonders and achievements, but also a world in deep trouble and turmoil. We have experienced the

joys of relationships, common decency, and humanity; but we have also been a witness to a disturbing history of wars, hate, discrimination, and destruction. We saw the effects of these tribulations on people in their everyday lives, but also in our own experiences.

We often shared stories and ideas, trying to make sense of it all and learning from each other in the process, and made plans that we implemented so that we might make the most difference possible for those around us.

I. Gentle in Demeanor, A Warrior Within: Education as a Weapon against Hate

Rod Bush had a gentle and humble demeanor on the surface that cloaked the warrior within. He used education as his weapon of choice against ignorance and hate. As a Black man, he could easily be overlooked or dismissed in this society, or at worst, be labeled with all the false negative stereotypes of his race by those filled with prejudice and hate. But Rod was a true giant among men.

Under the surface of his modest and unassuming manner was an exceptional intellectual who understood deeply the world around him and used that knowledge to educate others. As in the title of his book, *We Are Not What We Seem* (1999), it seemed to me that Rod was sending the message not to make judgments based upon racist assumptions and to look more deeply into the complexity of the history, context, and truth about preconceived notions. His influence was powerful—he raised awareness and changed attitudes to lead people to engage in actions that make a positive change in the world.

Rod Bush's impact can be felt and seen through all he has done to influence and enlighten those around him. He was like the pebble sent skipping over the waters of life, sending forth never ending reverberating ripples, one affecting the next and resulting in acknowledged (and many more unacknowledged) changes in the lives of those who knew him; in turn, those affected put into motion their own circles of influence, and so on, and so on in a continuing pattern.

II. A Personal Experience: Believing in the Power of the People

I know because Rod Bush has affected me personally in so many ways. My love for community, social justice, and the desire to make a difference is rooted in what I have learned from both Rod and Mel, and out of the love they have for all peoples of every race, creed, and color. Without them, I would never have been involved in community building nor Asian outreach activities that helped lead to the establishment of an Asian Studies Minor at Brooklyn College and an Asian American/Asian Research Institute at The City University of New York, nor would I have chosen career paths that I thought would have the potential to be catalysts for change.

As a journalist, I can tell the untold stories that need to be told or show the truth to the world. As an agent within several spheres of education, I have written many pieces I can be proud of and enabled others to create work that has had lasting and reverberating impact. At a personal level, I taught my children and friends how to see the world without the filters of prejudice and through a lens of understanding history, circumstances, and societal dynamics.

Rod and Mel shared a special life that was then shared with me. This had a great influence on me as Mel and I worked on community building initiatives at Brooklyn College. We had so many moments together, both happy and sad, that still play in my head like snippets of a movie or snapshots floating by in the stream of time.

There were so many moments together involving various gatherings at the student center for celebrations and events. One that stood out was when Dr. Robin D. G. Kelley came to speak at the same time that I was a panelist at a diversity event about a decade ago. It was at about the same time Dr. Kelley's book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, was published. I remember so clearly reading about it and how impressed I was by the idea of a vision for a future that would transform society, and at the same time, would hold a promise of hope and reconciliation with the past. That was just one example of the ripple effect of Rod and Mel's influence on my worldview.

III. Believing in Love is Contagious

Rod and Mel had so many connections to communities of people who were working towards a loving and just future: willing to do something to contribute to the collective vision of a better world. Countless dialogues, discussions, and actions came out of their union over the years. We each shared our ideas and knowledge with one another and with as many people we could reach to try to inch the world forward, one conversation and action at a time. Our thoughts and actions were grounded in the spirit of love and giving to those around us; it was contagious as our circles of influence grew and grew to create the change we wanted to see by ourselves becoming that change.

Beyond their activism, or perhaps as a part of it, I also picture Rod and Melanie as the hosts of those wonderful summertime gatherings of friends and family at their house. Another fond memory was of how much Rod loved a vegetarian meal that I made for him and Mel at my house. As vegetarians (primarily), even their eating habits reflected a humanity and caring for all living things. It was this mindfulness that so impressed me. As someone who loves meat, it was hard for me to process or change my own meat eating habits and I admired them for the willpower, strength, and discipline to follow that kind of diet.

IV. When We Live in Community, We can Live Courageously

Another fond memory was when Mel and Rod asked me if I wanted to come to the February 15, 2003, Day of Protest, a world-wide protest where about 12-14 million people in about 800 cities around the world protested against going into the Iraq war. This is something I would never have done on my own, despite my conviction that it was the right thing to do; the fact that Mel and Rod would be by my side gave me the courage to do it.

I knew it could be dangerous and worried about what my friends might think of me for what I considered to be pretty radical behavior. Rod and Mel helped me to overcome my fear and bridge the gap between feeling something and acting on it. The strength of our friendship was the support network I needed to act upon my convictions. They were

both physically present and emotionally reassuring.

History today has shown me that it was the right thing to do. There was so much that came out later that showed how much of a lie it was for us to enter that war. Enormous amounts of money that could have been invested in education or infrastructure were needlessly funneled into a never-ending war effort that continues to escalate to this day. I learned that history will always reveal the truth in the end. I remember how we talked on the train on the way over there. Rod would always say something so deep and from a place few would understand, but I understood him. He helped me understand why it was necessary to stand up for what is right.

The thing about standing up for what is right is that there are sometimes consequences attached to it because it goes against what has been codified as acceptable societal norms that have been shaped through people, power, and politics (which happens to be the name of a course taught in sociology). Hence, we come by the term, “the struggle,” which many of us must live by each day. It takes a special kind of courage to take a stand knowing full well the possible repercussions of the reactions of those who may not agree with us and whose motivations are not grounded in love, but quite the opposite.

We may not always make the right decisions or may have to make decisions we find hard to accept due to necessity, but in the end, we try to do our best despite whatever is happening around us.

V. Living Liberation Happens in Everyday Interaction

It was the little conversations with Rod and Mel—like the one that took place on the subway or took place in everyday places, whether while taking a stroll around Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, a walk along the beach, or just sitting at some small gathering—that helped spark my transformation to lead a more purposeful life. We had long discussions concerning topics related to the books they had written and the work we were doing, but it was also so much more because it not only involved just me or them, but also extended out to our personal lives, friends, and families.

We shared the joy of watching their daughter Sari (Sarafina) grow into a beautiful young woman, and we grieved together when their other beloved daughter, Soji (Sojourner Truth), died unexpectedly at such a young age. They both suffered so much through that loss and we who are their friends and family have suffered with them for the unbearable sadness they have had to endure.

But now those remaining have had to experience that sorrow and grief again because of the loss of our dear friend Rod Bush who had become like a family member to my own family.

VI. Being Present for Each Other

Even at the end, just a week before he died, I had the chance to visit with him at home. He was his usual self, always so gentle and with a smile that lit up the room. It was always the same with me just non-stop talking, and he so patiently and carefully listening, understanding it all, and responding thoughtfully to whatever was on my mind.

He was always so unassuming and modest, and would listen to a person with the same attention and interest no matter their educational background or occupation, high or low. He had a way of making all people feel comfortable around him. His gentle quietness gave no hint of the extraordinary intellectual giant within. It was through his writings and our conversations that I could see the man inside and to understand his beautiful mind and spirit embodied in a true scholar.

Perhaps the best tribute I have for him is in the words he wrote to me inside my copy of his book, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (1999, New York University Press):

To Loretta,

I hope that this story of the trials and tribulations of a people seeking justice, equality, and democracy for themselves and for all humanity will remind us of the potential that we have within us and the possibilities that we ultimately hold in our own hands to transcend and transform the

cruelties, degradations, and humiliations that so many of us suffer under the rule of capital, racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and intolerance.

I hope that we can continue a dialogue to connect the past to the present, and to the future. Your intelligence, integrity and courage inspire us to continue the struggle. You reinforce our faith in the ability of a determined people to see through this farce, and fight to create a better world for us and our children. But we will all have to pass the torch of freedom to future generations.

We hope that we can continue our discussion and through collaboration in certain areas bring about some changes in our immediate conditions. Please let's stay in touch. Mel connects to a wonderful community of people like yourself that gives me great hope for the future.

Warmest Regards,

Rod Bush

Rod Bush is a tribute unto himself for who he was and what he stood for. He will be missed dearly yet in the lessons we draw from his life and apply, he can always be present in ours.

Abstract

This essay authored by Loretta Chin, titled "Rod Bush: Passing the Torch for Love, Liberation, and Freedom," 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). Chin reflects on Rod Bush as an exemplar of how kindness, compassion, humility, and love for one's fellow human being can manifest in thoughts, words, and actions that can change the world for the better, one person or deed at a time; not just in large shows of grandiose demonstrations, but in the everyday decisions that each one of us must make in how we conduct our lives. In Chin's view, it is about how those decisions have the power to transform not just ourselves, but the world around us, and how each and every one of us has a responsibility to stand up for what is right as a declaration of who we are and what we stand for as a liberatory

and just process for all. This is a part of Rod Bush's story, but it is also a lesson and story that can be adapted by us all.

Author

Loretta Chin is an independent journalist, editor, researcher, and writer who has worked in the field of public higher education for over two decades. She worked closely with Dr. Melanie Bush on a Community Building Initiative as a special projects coordinator in the Division of Student Life at Brooklyn College. Together with Dr. Bush, she collaborated on the development of the Community Building Initiative, Arts of Democracy Project, where she coordinated a series of facilitated "BC Circles" dialogues involving the training of student facilitators and the participation of hundreds of students, staff, and faculty. She also coordinated an Asian Outreach Project to increase the participation of the Asian American/Asian community at Brooklyn College and The City University of New York (CUNY). These efforts helped to establish an Asian Studies minor at Brooklyn College and an Asian American and Asian Research Institute (AAARI) at CUNY. Loretta Chin has presented on numerous panels at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, AAARI, Brooklyn College, and other CUNY campuses. She has worked as a research/conference coordinator, writer, editor, and social media manager for many years in the Children and Youth Studies Program and Center at Brooklyn College/CUNY, which operates under a framework of a human rights perspective for children. Her written and editorial work is published in the Canarsie Courier Newspaper, the Brooklyn College Children and Youth Studies Program and Center, and AAARI/CUNY. Articles she has helped research for award winning journalist, Wayne Barrett, have appeared in major national publications.

References

Bush, Rod. 1999. *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century*. New York, NY: New York University Press.