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Can you be a good teacher—or instructor, or professor, or assistant dean, or deliverer of grants or IT services—if you avert your eyes now? There is a children's story that I remember with a crumpling in my belly, about a village where everybody lives in happiness, eating good food in brightly lit kitchens—all except a withered, wordless child who lives alone in a dark, dank basement. It's a Faustian agreement: To keep their diabolical favors, their warm soups and flute concerts, the people of this village must overlook the child in the cellar.

I surely hope higher education in America is not like that village. But maybe it is. In his recent book, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of “The Dream,” the collective delusion of “perfect houses with nice lawns. . . . The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. For so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.”

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What it will take to change the sheets—and I'm talking about the institutional racism and many other -isms in the academy—is a lot of honest, hard work. In this issue, author Dana Stachowiak offers a solution, and it’s not just “raising awareness…” She writes, “We must also raise
critical consciousness, not only to diversity, but to issues of equity, power, and privilege and oppression, and move faculty from passive observers of diversity initiatives to active participants in social justice education.”

This year’s authors urge action in a variety of ways. Author Diane Zeeuw’s powerful story of her son, Alex, who has schizophrenia, should move us to consider how we isolate students with psychiatric illnesses and deny them higher education. If a person is unlikely to hold a “productive” job, must he also be unworthy of the pursuit of ideas?

Others, such as authors Phu Phan and his colleagues, dive more deeply into the work that you do with students to teach them cultural competence. “Why do we have to talk about race? Why can’t we just all get along?” Phan’s students ask. But the talking, and the labor of self-reflection that follows, will free the child in the cellar.

NEA has never shirked from confronting racism: from its historic mid-20th century work around school desegregation to its newest work, charged by the 2015 NEA Representative Assembly in July, to spotlight the institutional racism and injustice that affects students.

“On a nearly daily basis, we hear disturbing stories: a student viciously beaten then arrested by campus police for underage drinking; racial slurs hurled at a student body president; a noose found hanging on a statue of a university’s first black student…These experiences aren’t new. But we are witnessing students speaking out, demanding justice, recognition, and an end to these purposeful and inherent prejudices,” wrote NEA President Lily Eskelsen García in a recent blog post. “These beautiful, brave rabble rousers will not be silenced. And neither will we,” she promised.

Finally, I must alert you to changes in the manner of production of Thought & Action. More than likely, you are not reading these words on the printed page, but on an iPad, Kindle, or other glowing screen. We no longer deliver a copy to every NEA Higher Ed household. If you want to request a print copy, visit www.subscribenea.com. Delivery is free to members. I also ask you to check nea.org/thoughtandaction frequently for newly published articles and calls for papers.

Mary Ellen Flannery is Thought & Action’s editor. She has worked for the National Education Association as a senior writer and editor since 2004. Previously, she reported on education for The Miami Herald.