Introduction: What is Revolutionary Love?

**We recommend that all students begin with this introductory lesson, especially those who have not read the book See No Stranger.**

Description

“Love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life giving—a choice we make over and over again. Love can be taught, modeled, and practiced. . . . “Revolutionary love” is the choice to enter into labor for others, for our opponents, and for ourselves in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an orientation to life that is personal and political, rooted in joy.”

(Kaur, 2020, p. 310)

This lesson complements Valarie Kaur’s 2018 TED talk: Three Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage and invites students to examine and explore Kaur’s definition of revolutionary love as a force for justice.
Learning Goals

- To define and explore revolutionary love as a choice to labor for others, opponents, and ourselves in the pursuit of justice
- To redefine love as more than emotion, but rather as the choice to enter into sweet labor
- To explore and reflect upon our own understandings and definitions of love

Materials Needed

- Valarie Kaur TED talk: Three Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage (20m)
- The transcript of the talk is also available.
- The Guide to Revolutionary Love Compass
- Strongly Recommended: See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love (Valarie Kaur, 2020)
- Material or device to write; art supplies (e.g. markers, colored pencils) and easel paper or whiteboard

Opening Reflection

Before viewing the TED talk, reflect upon the following questions. These prompts can be answered individually and/or in small groups.

Reflect and free-write upon the following questions.

- How do you personally define love?
- How did you learn about love from your family, friends, partners?

Share your responses in groups or pairs. In your groups, consider the following discussion questions:

- What do you notice about these definitions of love? What is similar and different about these definitions of love?
- What types or kinds of love are included in these definitions (ie. romantic love, familial love, love of country, self-love)?
- In what ways, and from whom, have we learned what it means to love and be loved?

**Options for educators:**

- If time permits, you may choose to have individuals begin by freewriting about the prompt individually, then work in small groups to create a collective illustration of their responses on larger pieces of easel paper or on a chalk/white board. Small groups could present their illustrations and the discussion questions could be discussed by the class or larger group.
**Definition and Guiding Questions**

“Love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life giving—a choice we make over and over again. Love can be taught, modeled, and practiced. It engages all our emotions: Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And when we think we have reached our limit, wonder is the act that returns us to love.”

‘Revolutionary love’ is the choice to enter into labor for others, for our opponents, and for ourselves in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an orientation to life that is personal and political, rooted in joy.” (Kaur, 2020, p. 310)

1. What is revolutionary love, as defined by Valarie Kaur?
2. How is revolutionary love similar and different to our society’s popular definition of love?
3. How can revolutionary love be a force for both personal and political transformation?

**Engagement and Dialogue: Introducing revolutionary love**

**View**

- [Three Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage](https://example.com) (Valarie Kaur, 2018, 20m).
- The transcript of the talk is also available.
- As you view the film, consider the following questions:
  - How does Kaur define revolutionary love?
  - In what ways is Kaur’s definition of love similar or different to your/your group’s definition of love?
Activity: The art of revolutionary love

After viewing the film, engage in the following discussion and illustration activity. If working in groups, you may utilize the same groups as created in the opening reflection.

Discuss the following questions:

- How does Kaur define revolutionary love?
- How is revolutionary love similar or different from the ways that you have been taught about love?
- Which of the 3 directions of revolutionary love—love for others, opponents, or ourselves—are you most curious about? Why?
- Based on Kaur’s talk, what is the relationship between love and justice?

Using images, symbols, and phrases, create an illustration of the definition of revolutionary love as defined by Kaur.

**Options for educators:**

- In a larger group, educators may choose to divide the students into 3 groups to focus their illustration on one of the directions of revolutionary love. For example: Group 1: illustrates love for others, Group 2: love for opponents, Group 3: love for ourselves.
- These illustrations could be shared with the large group by having each group present their illustration or by arranging a “gallery walk”: posting the illustrations around the room and asking students to walk around and view the illustrations as though viewing art in a gallery.

After creating and sharing these illustrations, refer to the questions below to facilitate dialogue about the film and illustrations.

Sample dialogue questions

*See the Key Points section below to guide the dialogue.

- What are some key distinctions between love as we have been taught (illustrated in the introductory discussion) and revolutionary love (as defined by Kaur)?
- How does revolutionary love ask us to act in ways that are different from the ways that love is “supposed to make us feel”?
- Do you think that we need revolutionary love in our communities and country now? Why or why not?
- What do you think are the challenges of fighting for justice through revolutionary love? What are the opportunities and possibilities?
- What do you think revolutionary love looks like in practice?

Closing reflection

Read the Guide to Revolutionary Love Compass and reflect on the following questions:
• Which of the three directions of revolutionary love—love for others, love for opponents, or love for ourselves—are most challenging for you to practice? Why?

• Which of the 10 practices of revolutionary love are the most intuitive or easiest for you to practice? Which are the most challenging? Why?

**After completing this lesson, educators may choose to proceed sequentially through the 10 lessons, or may “drop in” to any of the lessons that interest them.**

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**Key Points**

• “Revolutionary love is the choice to enter into labor for others, for our opponents, and for ourselves in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an orientation to life that is personal and political, rooted in joy” (Kaur, 2020, p. 310).

• There are three directions of Revolutionary Love: love for others, opponents, and ourselves. “Loving only ourselves is escapism; loving only our opponents is self-loathing; loving only others is ineffective. All three practices together make love revolutionary, and revolutionary love can only be practiced in community” (Kaur, 2020, p. 310).

• Revolutionary Love is a continual practice, a choice to labor and each of us has a role in any given time. We can all be midwives in this time of great transition (Kaur, 2020).

• Revolutionary love draws from the teachings and examples of generations of activists, community leaders, scholars, and ancestral wisdoms, particularly those of Black, Indigenous, women of color.

• “Revolutionary love is demanding labor, but it is also creative, transformative, and joyful labor—immeasurably complex and messy, tumultuous and revelatory, marked by wonder, and worth it” (Kaur, 2020, p. 315-316).
For Deeper Exploration

- Read *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (Kaur, 2020)
- Additional readings to accompany this lesson for undergraduate audiences may include *All About Love* (bell hooks) and *Art of Loving* (Erich Fromm)
- Educators and scholars could explore the ethic of love within their specific fields. For example, “How have scholars and practitioners theorized or applied an ethic of love (or an ethic of care) in your field of study?”
  - Examples: In the field of education, scholars/pedagogues who write about teaching and learning through an ethic of love and healing include bell hooks, Paolo Freire, Antonia Darder, Jeffrey M.R. Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morell, Antonia Darder, and Shawn Ginwright.
  - In the field of peacebuilding, scholars include Johan Galtung, John Paul Lederach.
- In ethics, scholars include Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and other scholars of moral theory

Additional Resources and Readings (a partial list)

- Notes and references from the TED talk
- Selected Reading list
Lesson 1: Wonder

Description

“It is easy to wonder about the internal life of the people closest to us. It is harder to wonder about people who seem like strangers or outsiders. But when we choose to wonder about people we don’t know, when we imagine their lives and listen for their stories, we begin to expand the circle of those we see as part of us. We prepare ourselves to love beyond what evolution requires.”
(Kaur, 2020, p. 10-11)

“Seeing no stranger is an act of will. In brain-imaging studies, when people are shown a picture of a person of a different race long enough for comprehension, it is possible for them to dampen their unconscious fear response. We can change how we see.”
(Kaur, 2020, p. 26-27)

In See No Stranger, Valarie Kaur writes that the practice of wonder and “seeing no stranger” can transform us, our communities, and our nation and our world.

Wonder is the first practice of revolutionary love for others. Wonder is the practice of cultivating a sense of awe-filled openness and reflection about others’ thoughts and experiences, their pain and joy, their wants and needs. Wonder involves seeing the world and other people as part of me I do not yet know—vast, complex, and worthy of love. When we wonder about other people, we acknowledge that their lives are as vast and complex as our own. We can begin to expand our circles of care when we understand others as part of us.
This lesson focuses on the relationship between wonder, storytelling, and revolutionary love. The stories we tell and hear about others are powerful. Stories reveal a society’s values, perceptions, and norms; stories can create bonds or barriers between communities. This lesson highlights Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk: “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009) and asks us to examine how stories can help us to “see no stranger.”

In her talk, Adichie highlights the importance of complex, diverse storytelling as a way to honor the humanity of oneself and others. Adichie speaks of her experience as a young girl in Nigeria and the ways that her imagination was nurtured, and also limited, by the British authors she read. She recounts how “single stories” shaped her reality and advocates for the importance of telling complex stories from multiple perspectives that value our collective humanity and dignity.

When we wonder about another person’s story and the social forces that influence their experiences, we can begin to ask ourselves how we can grieve and fight with others for a more just world. See the Lesson 2: Grieve and Lesson 3: Fight for additional information.

**Learning Goals**

- To explore the practice of wonder through examining the processes and power dynamics of storytelling
- To examine the ways that stories reveal information about the listeners, the storytellers, and the society and culture in which it is told
- To question how issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other social factors shape how stories are told, heard, and valued
- To reflect upon our own practice of wondering about others

**Materials Needed**

- TED Talk: “The danger of a single story” (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009)
- For reference:
  - Introduction to Revolutionary Love
  - Guide to Revolutionary Love Compass
  - Strongly recommended: See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love: Chapter 1 (Valarie Kaur, 2020)
Opening Reflection

Write a free-write response (for approximately 3 minutes) to the following prompt. In a free-write, the goal is to keep your pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) continually for the allotted time, without editing. There are no right or wrong responses. Alternatively, students could create a sketch or use images or memes to respond to the prompt.

- “People expect me to be __________, but I’m actually ________.”

Now reflect on the following questions. Share your response in a group, or pair:

- How does it feel to be perceived or seen differently than you actually are?
- What do you think these expectations of you are based on?
- Do these expectations generally lead to positive treatment by others? If so how?
- Do you experience negative consequences from these expectations? If so, how?
- What do you wish other people knew about you?

Definition and Guiding Questions

Wonder is the first practice of revolutionary love for others. To wonder is to cultivate a sense of awe and openness to others’ thoughts and experiences, their pain, their wants and needs. It is to look upon the face of anyone or anything and say: You are a part of me I do not yet know. Wonder is an orientation to humility: recognizing that others are as complex and infinite to themselves as we are to ourselves. Wondering about a person gives us information for how to love them.

Wonder is the wellspring of love. The practice of wonder and “seeing no stranger” can transform us and our nation.

- How can the practice of wonder help us to “see no stranger” and to love others?
- What are the challenges of practicing wonder for others?
- What do we lose or risk by not wondering about others?
- What becomes possible for us and for our nation when we practice wonder and “seeing no stranger”?
Engagement and Dialogue

View

“The danger of a single story” (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009)

The transcript of the talk is also available.

As you view the talk, consider the following questions:

- How does Adichie define a “single story”?
- In what ways are single stories dangerous?
- Take note of any quotations that are particularly noteworthy or impactful for you.

Sample questions for dialogue

Reflect upon or discuss the following quotations from Adiche’s talk in pairs or groups.

*To guide the dialogue, see “Key points” below.

1) “The problem with stereotypes is not that they are inaccurate, it is that they are incomplete.” (Adichie, 2009)

2) “Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become.” (Adichie, 2009)

3) “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. . . . When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” (Adichie, 2009)

- What do you think about Adichie’s statements above? Can you relate to any of these statements?
- What is Adichie’s main argument? What are the dangers of the “single story”?
- What are some “single stories” that you have heard, or have experienced?
- Which parts (if any) of Adichie’s talk do you relate to? Why?
- How are “single stories” related to race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other social factors?
  - In what ways do we learn and internalize these stories about ourselves and others? In what ways can we unlearn these stories?
- In what ways can stories empower and humanize others? Do stories have the power to change the world? Why or why not?
Wonder and revolutionary love

*See “Key points” below to guide dialogue about the questions below.

- In *See No Stranger*, Kaur (2020) writes:

  Stereotypes are the most reductive kind of story: They reduce others to single, crude images. In the United States, the stereotypes are persistent: black as criminal, brown as illegal, indigenous as savage, Muslims and Sikhs as terrorists, Jews as controlling, Hindus as primitive, Asians of all kinds as perpetually foreign, queer and trans people as sinful, disabled people as pitiable, and women and girls as property. Such stereotypes are in the air, on television and film, in the news, permeating our communities, and ordering our institutions. We breathe them in, whether or not we consciously endorse them. Even if we are part of a marginalized community, we internalize these stereotypes about others and ourselves. In brain-imaging studies, for example, nearly half of black people, queer people, and women exhibited unconscious fear and distrust in response to pictures of people who looked like them. In other words, we live in a culture that makes us strange to ourselves. (p. 17)

- How does Kaur’s quotation relate to Adichie’s definition of the “single story” and its dangers?
- What do you think Kaur means when she writes that “we live in a culture that makes us strange to ourselves”?
- How can the practice of wonder and “seeing no stranger” help us to see beyond “single stories”?
- How might the practice of wonder help to transform ourselves, our communities, and even our institutions?

- For readers of *See No Stranger*: See the [Reader’s Guide](#) for additional discussion questions.

Closing reflection and assignment

Kaur writes that *Seeing No Stranger* is an act of will, one that requires conscious practice. A simple exercise, with massive repetition, can help us to orient to the world with wonder. Repetition can help us re-train our brains to “see no stranger”. This assignment is to experiment with this practice for one week.

Every day for 7 days (or a time frame of your choosing), practice “seeing no stranger.” As you move through the day and encounter people in your classes, on transit, on the street, on TV, etc, practice saying to yourself as you look at their faces: “Sibling, Sister, Brother, Aunt, Uncle, Son, Daughter, Grandparent, Family, etc.” You may also choose to say to yourself, “You are a part of me I do not yet know.”

Each day, take a few minutes to briefly journal about what you notice and learn as you engage in this practice of wonder. Be kind to yourself and others in this practice and consider the following questions:
● What did you notice today as you conducted this exercise?
● Who were the people it was easiest to wonder about and call “family”? Who was most challenging? Why?
● What surprised you about this practice? Did this exercise reveal any strong feelings or biases? If so, how?
● What was this practice like for you? What did you learn about yourself as you practiced wonder?

If possible, share your reflections with others to discuss. In your journal and dialogues with others, consider: what additional practices might you develop in order to cultivate an orientation to wonder?

Wonder is a lifelong practice, one that can be nurturing and joyful. If the practice is challenging, that’s okay too. Part of the practice is also not being strange to ourselves and offering ourselves our own wonder and empathy.
Key Points

- Wonder is the first practice of revolutionary love for others. Wonder is the practice of cultivating an awe-filled openness and reflection about others’ thoughts and experiences, their pain and joy, their wants and needs. Wonder involves seeing the world and other people as *part of me I do not yet know*—vast, complex, and deserving of love. When we wonder about other people, we acknowledge that their lives are as vast and complex as our own. We can begin to expand our circles of care when we understand others as part of us (Kaur, 2020).

- Acts of love begin in wonder. We have to wonder about someone in order to know how to love them. “We begin to sense that they are to themselves as vast and complex as we are to ourselves, their inner world as infinite as our own. In other words, we are seeing them as our equal. We are gaining information about how to love them. Wonder is the wellspring for love” (Kaur, 2020, p. 10).

- Wonder is a sustained, dynamic process. Wonder requires practice and conscious repetition. When we are able to wonder about others, we begin to “see no stranger”. Then the labor of love begins (Kaur, 2020).

- The practice of wonder and *seeing no stranger* is ancestral and has been taught to us by spiritual leaders, indigenous healers, and social reformers for generations. “These teachings were rooted in the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual contexts of their times, but they touched a common vision of our interconnectedness” (Kaur, 2020, p. 11).

- Our interconnectedness is also a wondrous, biological fact. The primary DNA in my body is contained in yours and in the bodies of the animals and trees and amoeba. We can look at anything and everyone and say: *You are a part of me that I do not yet know* (Kaur, 2020).

- Reclaiming our capacity to wonder about each other is hard work and it requires practice. Implicit bias, which happens before conscious thought, provides a biological barrier; this response is automatic, but not inevitable. We also face social barriers to “seeing no stranger” in the form of stereotypes and biases that we are conditioned to believe. But with practice, we can train ourselves to see others differently. We have the ability to change how we see others (Kaur, 2020).

- When we are able to wonder about others, we are able to grieve with them and to fight for and with them. These are the practices of revolutionary love for others (Kaur, 2020).
For Deeper Exploration

- Explore Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso’s concept of “majoritarian stories” and “counter-stories.” Majoritarian stories are “mono-vocal” stories that represent stories of privilege and that ignore, misrepresent, and/or dehumanize people of color and other marginalized groups. Counter-stories are “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are often not told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The [counter] story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (Solórzano and Yosso).

- When we think deeply about the stories we tell and the stories we are told (in the media, in our history books), we can practice wonder by asking ourselves:
  - Whose stories are most often seen as valid and trustworthy?
  - Whose stories do we find easiest to cultivate empathy and compassion for?
  - For whose stories do we feel indifference?
  - Whose stories are not told? Why?
  - What are the social forces that influence the ways that stories are told and received?

As we work towards justice, we seek not only to wonder about the stories of others, but also to challenge the unequal systems that shape our experiences through discrimination and oppression. Using wonder to examine the power of storytelling offers a starting place to challenge inequalities of power.

- Read john a. powell’s work on two types of stories: breaking stories and bridging stories. Breaking stories focus inward, towards what and who we already know, and against groups we consider to be “other” or “outsider.” Bridging stories turn us outwards, towards other groups especially those different from us, in the effort to build connection and belonging. View a conversation with powell and Valarie Kaur (along with Lucas Johnson and Monica Guzman Preston) connecting the practices of “bridging” with “seeing no stranger.”

- Explore quantitative studies on storytelling and empathy and reduction or prejudice and in-group bias. Research has shown that storytelling, if empathy toward outgroup characters is intentionally induced, can reduce both discriminatory behavior, explicit attitudes, and implicit biases.

- Explore the following questions: Whose stories are told in our school curriculum and textbooks? What is possible when we tell stories of groups who have been left out of our textbooks? Read about the value of teaching disciplines like Ethnic Studies on students and schools.

- This lesson could be paired with additional examples to highlight campaigns that focus on people who have been rendered invisible or less valued, such as Say Her Name, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Movement for Black Lives.

- Explore the questions and practices of Critical Media Literacy to examine stories in media.

- Learn about Bobbie Harro’s model The Cycle of Socialization which describes the societal processes that train us to accept certain views and stereotypes and to uphold systems of
inequality, even despite our good intentions. Harro describes how our social identities are learned and enforced through a Cycle of Socialization, which she defines as “pervasive, consistent, circular, self-perpetuating, and often invisible” (Harro, 2000, p. 15). Explore the processes of breaking the cycle of socialization through education, questioning, listening, and working to change unjust systems. Harro’s article *The Cycle of Liberation* provides a visualization of ways to break the cycles of socialization that we all learn.

- Explore tests on implicit bias, as well as critiques and limitations of these assessments.
- Examine studies on in-group bias and cultivating compassion.
- Explore readings on systemic racism, oppression, and resistance. A few starting places include *Readings for diversity and social justice* (M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zuniga (Eds.), 2013), *Stamped from the Beginning* (Ibram X. Kendi, 2016), and Scaffolded Anti-Racism Resources.
- For additional ways to practice wonder, see *Guide to the Revolutionary Love Compass*.

**Additional Resources and Readings (a partial list)**

- **Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit**: Resource with critical tools and modules to fight structural racism with an intersectional lens. See the Racial Justice Trainings section.
- **Facing History and Ourselves**: Resource for educators to teach history with a focus on inequalities and discrimination while promoting students’ own roles and responsibilities in present time. Includes resources for teaching both about history as well as contemporary issues.
- The **Storytelling Project Curriculum**: Curriculum on Learning About Race and Racism through Storytelling and the Arts, focusing on the framework of counter stories.
- **Voice of Witness**: Voice of Witness advances human rights by amplifying the voices of people impacted by injustice through books, educational programs, and tools for educators.
- **Zinn Education Project**: Resources and pedagogical tools to teach history from a social justice perspective.