



Loretta Ross, Professor and Activist From Pain to Purpose

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on February 5, 2024 by Noah Remnick

- ▣ Access *The Thread* episode of Loretta Ross on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- ▣ Access her long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#)

Learning Objectives

**Note:* This episode mentions mature content and is recommended for older students.

Social Studies Focus

- ▣ Reflect on the role sharing personal experiences, and narratives inform and shape the understanding of social issues and change
- ▣ Define reproductive justice and the concept of intersectionality
- ▣ Explore the importance of mental health care as it pertains to social movements and activism
- ▣ Expand their understanding of what it takes to build movements

English Language Arts Focus

- ▣ Evaluate how Loretta Ross uses personal stories to convey complex social issues
- ▣ Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- ▣ Analyze, reflect on, and discuss the title of the episode “From Pain to Purpose”
- ▣ Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life

Episode Overview

In this emotional and candid episode of *The Thread*, we meet Loretta Ross, a survivor of childhood sexual assault who has transformed her personal trauma into a lifelong commitment to keeping other women safe from harm. We follow her life’s journey and her unwavering commitment in adulthood to the fight for women’s rights and social justice. Loretta Ross helped create the very concept of “reproductive justice,” a cause that remains central to her life’s work as an activist and now as an academician. After suffering hardships that would have sent most people into paralysis and despair, Loretta Ross has always maintained positivity and hope. Her story is sure to touch your soul and inspire your heart.



Biography

Loretta J. Ross is an academic and activist. Born in Temple, Texas, she is Professor at Smith College in the Program for the Study of Women and Gender where she teaches courses on white supremacy, human rights, and Calling In the Call Out culture. Loretta is a MacArthur Fellow, Class of 2022, for her work as an advocate of Reproductive Justice and Human Rights. Loretta was the National Coordinator of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective (2005-2012) and co-created the theory of Reproductive Justice. Loretta was National Co-Director of the April 25, 2004, March for Women’s Lives in Washington D.C., the largest protest march in U.S. history at that time. She founded the National Center for Human Rights Education (NCHRE) in Atlanta, Georgia, launched the Women of Color Program for the National Organization for Women (NOW), and was the national program director of the National Black Women’s Health Project. One of the first African American women to direct a rape crisis center, Loretta was the third Executive Director of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center.



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode’s opening.

Suggested Steps

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of Loretta Ross’s episode with students:

“I started this work absolutely in rage because I was mad at what happened to me as a child. I was mad because I had to deal with it. Thousands of rape victims, and man, when I had to deal with white feminists and mad when I had to deal with people who believed in the Klan. I was angry. But, how we handle that anger will determine whether we build something or burn something down.”



▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Loretta Ross from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?

▣ **Next,** as a class, discuss the role of “the opening” in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?

▣ **Last,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode’s title, “From Pain to Purpose.” Have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



Photos: School portrait of Loretta Ross ninth grade Jefferson Davis Junior High School San Antonio TX, 1967. (Loretta Ross Smith College Special Collections) *top*; Ross Family Reunion at family home in San Antonio Texas Summer 1980 Loretta Ross is seated far left. (Loretta Ross Smith College Special Collections) *lower left*; Graduation from Sam Houston High School 1970. (Loretta Ross Smith College Special Collections) *lower right*



Teaching Tip:

The Thread Up Close

Step One: Watch Loretta Ross’s episode “From Pain to Purpose” here.

Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ❑ What thoughts, feelings, or questions would you like to share with Loretta Ross?
- ❑ How did Loretta Ross transform her anger into activism?
- ❑ What is reproductive justice? How does it differ from traditional reproductive rights movements?
- ❑ How did Loretta Ross’s personal experiences shape her commitment to social justice work?

Step Two: After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of her interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a *Thread* lesson connection: If you are exploring hope as an emotion, a mindset, or practice in their lives or to connect it to literature or history, return to the end of Loretta Ross’s episode (edited for clarity and brevity) and read her point of view of the importance of hope:

“I have benefited from a lot of mentors in my life that taught me the importance of maintaining joy and hope. I remember when I was young and doing the tenant organizing or the anti-rape organizing and my mentors back then said, ‘Loretta, you’ve got to learn to party as hard as you work. You just can’t take yourself that seriously anymore. Trust me, if you take care of yourself, the oppression will still be around, the movement will still be around.’ And so that’s my sustainable practice. I think there should be a human right to hope. Because without hope, we don’t fight human rights violations; without hope, you’ve given up the expectation that things can change and get better. So hope is not an option if you do human rights work, it’s a necessity. I want to encourage people to know how they can make their lives matter, how they can make a difference when the world seems a mess, just start cleaning where you are, even if everything we’re dealing with feels very overwhelming.”



Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ❑ How would you describe Ross’s point of view on the role of hope and its relationship to activism?
- ❑ How can any of this advice be applied to your own life?
- ❑ How do you take care of yourself? What do you do to feel hope and joy in your life and world?
- ❑ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from her stories?



Activity: From Pain to Purpose

Loretta Ross’s contributions to social justice can empower students to see their experiences and emotions as potential catalysts for personal and societal change. Ross believes we have a better chance of building the power that we need by transitioning from a “call out cancel culture” into a culture of “calling in” which emphasizes love, respect, and inviting people into conversations as opposed to blaming and shaming or fighting.

Organize the class into small groups. Have students read each sample scenario before discussing the Calling In solution. Then have students write an original scenario and discuss ‘A Calling In Approach.’

Scenario One: A classmate makes a joke that’s insensitive. What would you do?

A Calling In Approach: Instead of saying, “That’s offensive!” the student can say, “I understand you were trying to be funny, but that joke made me feel uncomfortable because...” and explain why.

Scenario Two: A student shares an opinion in class that others disagree with. What would you do?

A Calling In Approach: Students can practice respectfully disagreeing, saying things like, “I understand your point, but I see it differently because...” or “I think there are other factors to consider.”

Original Scenario:

A Calling In Approach:



Additional Resources

- ▣ [Loretta Ross](#) - original website
- ▣ [Loretta Ross](#) - Smith College website

