

Healing Centered Youth Organizing: A Framework for Youth Leadership in the 21st Century



By Nicole Lee
For Urban Peace Movement (2014)

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Erase My Pain (By Rayna Smith)

I wish Mr. Clean could magically erase my pain;
A day my heart won't ache wanting what I know is gone;
A day with my mother alone;
I wish Mr. Clean could magically erase the pain of the mothers, sisters, and
brothers;
Whose lives will never be the same;
Behind guns and gangs;
I'm the sister of a baby brother who almost didn't make it;
'Cause a coward had a gun;
One bullet in my Mom's head while she was pregnant;
That's where he placed it;
See, my people were deprived of the good life;
All they know is the hood life;
Like, you shot my brother;
I'll shoot your brother;
And that's all right;
My people couldn't tell you what living in a mansion feels like;
Though they could lead you through Santa Rita with no lights;
My people don't know better;
So they can't do better;
They know if they apply for jobs they don't stand a chance;
So they grab bundles & bangers to get money in their hands;
They know to run from the police;
It's not that they wanna be on the streets;
How else are their babies gonna eat?
We continue to stray away from the real issues;
These programs & schools don't empower kids;
We wonder why the youth are powerless;
And the streets devour them;
How long are we gonna blame the youth for doing all they know how to do?

Introduction

In preparing to write this paper about how we can break the cycle of violence and mass incarceration in our cities, I revisited the 2013 list of Oakland's homicide victims.¹ With the passing of each year we must face a list like this, a scrolling litany of names with red dots and locations, signifying too much heartbreak—more sadness than I can even comprehend. As I looked over the list of 2013's victims, the first name that caught my eye struck me with painful familiarity. It belonged to the nephew of one of my youth members, a young woman who had already lost her older brother to gun violence just a few years earlier. The list for 2013 bears 93 names. It is significantly lower than 2012's list of 131 names, but it is still unequivocally too long. There are too many names, and too many young people among them. The last homicide of 2013 occurred when a 13-year old boy was fatally shot near the East Oakland-San Leandro border. His 19-year old brother was murdered three weeks later. It hurts to think of what their family has lost – two children in a mere 19 days. It also hurts to remember the beautiful face of 8-year old Alaysha Carradine, shot and killed during a sleepover at a friend's house last year.

Like many others in urban communities around the country, I struggle to make sense of it all. How did we get here? Why is this happening? And who, or what, is to blame? During an interview, a reporter from the Oakland Tribune once told me that he went out on the streets of East Oakland to talk to people about the violence. He said that many of the adults he had spoken with anecdotally attributed the violence to Oakland's young people, the vast majority of whom are young people of color. Again and again he heard the adults say, "It's the youth. They're just crazy."

As a lifelong resident of Oakland, I understand perfectly the confusion and frustration that people feel in the face of the crisis of urban violence. I understand the impulse to find

¹ San Jose Mercury News, Bay Area Homicides 2013; <http://www.mercurynews.com/homicides-2013>

someone to blame for what is happening in our cities. But this violence is not happening because our youth are “just crazy” or “out of control.” I have been in the field as a youth organizer in Oakland for more than 15 years, and I can testify that this perception of our young people could not be further from the truth. The youth I have worked with are incredibly resilient, intelligent, and creative. Their lives are not easy; many struggle to make it in a world where they have found little support and little compassion for their trials and struggles. But they are not “crazy” and “out of control.” And they are not to blame for the crisis of violence in U.S. cities.

Throughout California and across the country, communities of color are caught in a cycle of violence and mass incarceration, a cycle whose wheels were in motion years before these young people were even born. These wheels turn in the staggeringly unequal economy, where quality jobs are scarce—especially for young people of color—and the average CEO of a large corporation makes more than 350 times what the average worker does.² They turn in the schools, where only 56% of California’s black male students get their diploma in four years.³ They turn in the justice system, where the criminalization of youth of color and entire communities has helped give the United States the highest incarceration rate in the world, with the vast majority of those behind bars being African American and Latino men. Today’s young people were born into the lasting impacts of the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, a social and economic crisis that ripped through urban communities and left behind a trail of violence, incarceration, and substance abuse—impacts that hit young people of color and their families the hardest. Today’s youth struggle

² AFL-CIO Website, CEO-to-Worker Pay Ratios Around The World, 2012
http://www.aflcio.org/Corporate-Watch/CEO-Pay-and-You/CEO-to-Worker-Pay-Gap-in-the-United-States/Pay-Gaps-in-the-World#_ftn1

³ Scott Foundation for Public Education, The Urgency of Now, State Graduation Data
<http://blackboysreport.org/national-summary/state-of-the-states>

with the emotional and psychological trauma that comes with this kind of social devastation—and with the deep inequality that makes this devastation possible. And on top of it all, they are being blamed for the problem.

After years of working with Oakland youth, I am convinced that the only way out of this cycle is to develop a new model of “Healing-Centered Youth Organizing” that can help our young people and our communities collectively heal from the shared trauma of deep racial and economic inequality. Such an approach can integrate the “inner” dimension of self-transformation with the “outer” dimension of social transformation to create outcomes that neither could achieve on its own.

This paper begins with a discussion of the strategic importance of building leadership amongst youth of color for social change. As the paper continues, it highlights the necessity of healing modalities to address the trauma experienced by low-income youth of color. Unaddressed, this trauma can serve as a barrier to real and lasting change. The paper concludes by arguing that healing and transformational contemplative practices must be integrated into more conventional social change approaches such as youth organizing and policy advocacy. Ultimately, as a society, our test will be whether we can stop seeing young people as the cause of the problem and start recognizing, instead, that they hold the solution.

The Strategic Role of “High Risk / High Opportunity” Youth of Color

While the majority of Americans may view young people of color as marginal or as “someone else’s problem,” the reality is that more than 70% of Californians under the age of 25 identify as people of color.⁴ The fate of everyone in the state is tied to the fate of these

⁴ The California Endowment Sons & Brothers Plan
https://www.calendow.org/uploadedFiles/Health_Happends_Here/Sons%20%20Brothers%20Plan.pdf

young people. Dr. King's words from his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" still ring true today:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.⁵

To solve the social and economic crises that we face, we need to look to young people of color, young people in struggling urban communities beset by violence, as the *solution*, and we need to develop ways to support their leadership in our effort to create healthy, peaceful, and thriving communities.

There are at least two fairly straightforward reasons why young people of color must be at the center of social change. The first is that young people have always played a key role in social change movements, particularly in U.S. racial justice movements. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), led by young African American college students, was one of the core organizations of the Civil Rights Movement. The average age of a member of the Black Panther Party was 18-20 years old. Students were the backbone of the U.S. anti-apartheid movement. Young people are ideal "change-makers" because they are less attached to old or conventional ways of doing things. They tend toward creativity, innovation, and new ideas. They are less invested in the current system, and they tend to be more willing to take social and political risks.

The second reason that we should prioritize the leadership of youth of color became clear to me when I heard environmental author Paul Hawken⁶ use the metaphor of a healthy watershed in a speech about creating sustainable local economies. He said that in a healthy watershed, fertile soil absorbs rain when it falls, and the rain feeds the whole ecosystem. The local environment flourishes as a result. However, environmental degradation has left many places around the world with dry, cracked soil. In these places,

⁵ "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; April 1963.

⁶ Paul Hawken; http://www.paulhawken.com/paulhawken_frameset.html

the rains seldom come. But, even when they do, the soil is so damaged that it can't absorb the rain. The water runs off elsewhere. Hawken described this as a metaphor to illustrate issues surrounding local economies, but I found it just as helpful when thinking about my work with Oakland's young people.

In 2008, I was working for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights on Silence The Violence, a peace-making effort I co-founded that worked with young people deeply impacted by street violence in Oakland. At the same time, I had the chance and good fortune to assist in the fledgling Green-Collar Jobs Campaign, a policy effort that hoped to create jobs for low-income people in the emerging green economy. Working on both of these campaigns at once brought into sharp relief the gap between the youth that I was working with in Silence The Violence and the opportunities that we were fighting to create in the Green-Collar Jobs Campaign. I wondered and worried whether the youth I worked with would be ready to take whatever green jobs we helped create. Did they even know what a "green job" was or why it was important? I came to understand that social change work is about occupying the gap between the policy changes we advocate for and the ability and willingness of the people in our communities—particularly the young people—to realize the benefits of those changes, to take advantage of those opportunities.

Revisiting Hawken's metaphor, the policy wins that we seek are the rain, and the youth are the soil. The soil has to be tended to and cared for so that it can absorb the rain. If we continue to advocate for policy change without investing in the leadership of and creating a sense of buy-in among the young people whose lives we seek to impact then it will be much harder for us to sustain change in our communities.

"Street Intellectualism": The Crisis and the Opportunity

Beyond these two readily apparent reasons to invest in our young people's leadership is a new concept, "Street Intellectualism," which is emerging from our work on the ground in Oakland with "high opportunity youth."⁷ We are finding that youth of color who have been pushed to the extreme margins of conventional society, largely excluded and disconnected from mainstream social institutions, are strategically positioned to play a leadership role in transforming those very institutions and ushering in social change. Many say these are "high-risk youth"; we think of them as "high-opportunity youth." They tend to be older teens or young adults who have been involved with the criminal justice system, the child welfare system, or both. Most have experienced the "street life."

Urban Peace Movement and United Roots Oakland, our close organizational partner, have worked together for years reaching out to this specific segment of Oakland's young people. Through past projects like Silence The Violence and the Turf Unity Music Project, and through our current program DetermiNation⁸, we have built a base of relationships among youth and young adults in Oakland who are "in the streets." And, based on this work, we have begun to develop a concept that one of our facilitators, Markese Bryant,⁹ calls "Street Intellectualism."

Our notion of street intellectualism begins with the idea that "the streets" are an institution. (This is not a new idea but one that has grown out of a rather robust body of work in the fields of Africana/Black Studies and Popular Culture & Contemporary Media

⁷ The term "high opportunity youth" is an emerging term in the youth development field that refers to young people largely disconnected from mainstream institutions. They tend to be older teens or young adults who may have had involvement with the criminal justice system, the child welfare system, or both.

⁸ The DetermiNation Program is an African American young men's circle that is run through a collaboration between Urban Peace Movement and United Roots Oakland. The program serves "high opportunity" African American young men. www.determinationmedia.org

⁹ Markese Bryant, Open Society / Echoing Green Black Male Achievement Fellow & DetermiNation Program Facilitator; <http://www.echoinggreen.org/fellows/markese-bryant>

Studies.)¹⁰ The streets are the landing place for those pushed out of conventional educational, political, economic, and civic institutions. For those “in the streets,” mere survival in the face of hardship becomes a primary goal. The premium placed on survival pushes young people who are in the streets toward a certain set of skills and sensibilities that can be very helpful in other contexts. These include: 1) outside-the-box thinking and resourcefulness; 2) a willingness to take risks (i.e., the ability to move forward in the face of uncertainty and with a kind of fearlessness about taking action); 3) networking and communication; 4) adaptability; and 5) situational awareness, to name just a few.

In contrast, many of the traditional institutions geared toward preparing people for the old economy (i.e., mass industry) discourage creativity and risk-taking and focus instead on teaching people to “follow the rules” and “play it safe.” Today, many of these traditional institutions are struggling to be relevant in the face of the anticipated challenges of the 21st century (e.g., climate change, global economic insecurity, growing political instability, competition for scarce natural resources, etc.) and the needs of the new, innovation-based economy. These challenges reflect the dynamic tensions driving the large-scale social transformation we are beginning to see all around us—most obviously the tension between the old and the new. On one hand, Americans are struggling to figure out how to equip young people within traditional institutions with “21st century skills.” But on the other hand, these same institutions attempt to “fix” youth who have fallen out of the system—youth who have been developing those same 21st century skills in the streets—by punishing them and forcing them to “follow the rules” and “play it safe.”

Indeed, in some ways the world becomes more like “the streets” every day. Our cities, our economy, and our planet are all in crisis mode whether we recognize it or not. We

¹⁰ See: http://scounsel.tripod.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/oliver_streets.pdf

stand collectively in great peril, but that peril also creates great opportunity for change and for new things to be born into the world. As 99-year-old Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs¹¹ has said, we now have the chance to evolve to a “higher state of humanity.”¹² She says, “The time has come for us to reimagine everything . . . It’s a wonderful, wonderful time to be alive.”¹³ The resourcefulness, adaptability, and fearlessness that high-opportunity young people in the streets have developed can and should be a part of that reimagining. But in order to unlock this potential we must recognize the value of their experiences and we must change the context in which they are operating.

“Risk-taking” is the kind of 21st century skill that we might think of within the framework of “street intellectualism.” The high stakes of street-hustling naturally bring with them a risk-taking culture. But risk-taking “in the streets,” within the contexts of poverty and mass-incarceration, and without healing and support, has destructive and potentially deadly consequences—a dynamic that plays out in cities like Oakland and Chicago. In order to leverage the ability and willingness of urban youth to take calculated risks in a way that benefits themselves and their communities, we must create the supports and safety nets necessary to hold our youth so that the risks they take and the mistakes they make do not cost them their lives. We have to create new contexts in which they can take risks. Nurtured risk-taking can lead to incredible innovation and community transformation. This is one of

¹¹ Grace Lee Boggs is a 99-year-old Chinese American activist and philosopher who worked under C. L. R. James in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s Boggs went on to become a member of the Black Power Movement in Detroit. She is still politically active to this day, priding herself on her ability to continually transform her perspective as the world changes.

¹² A Quote by Grace Lee Boggs; <http://blog.gaiam.com/quotes/authors/grace-lee-boggs>

¹³ Grace Lee Boggs in Conversation with Angela Davis, March 2, 2012, UC Berkeley Campus; <http://www.radioproject.org/2012/02/grace-lee-boggs-berkeley/>

the things separating upper-middle-class white male entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley from the young black and Latino males in the Oakland streets, just 45 minutes down the road.

We are certainly not arguing that it is a good thing that our young people are in the streets and pushed to the brink of survival. We are saying that, because this has already happened to them, they have begun to develop a set of skills that place them in a strategic position to meet the challenges of the new century. We also know, however, that the adversity these youth have faced in the streets has been deeply traumatic for them. “Street Intellectualism” is an acknowledgement of the value of their experiences, and it is predicated on the belief that our youth can ultimately transform their pain into freedom.

Moving from destructive risk-taking to nurtured risk-taking will require an integrated approach to social change, one that transforms us as human beings as much as it transforms the system. We must craft an approach that combines healing and transformational work with work to empower young people to transform the systems and institutions that perpetuate harm and inequality. I call this approach “Healing-Centered Youth Organizing.”

Social Trauma

To fully understand the need for Healing-Centered Youth Organizing, we must examine the impact that social and economic inequality has had on our young people and on our communities as a whole. Young people of color are struggling when it comes to many social and economic indicators, such as high school drop out rates, rates of criminal justice system contact and incarceration, and unemployment rates. They are pushed out of schools through punitive and discriminatory disciplinary practices. They have less access to quality jobs and viable economic opportunities. They are more likely to be incarcerated or

fall victim to violent crime than their white counterparts. These facts have led to the grave misperceptions of our young people as simply “crazy” or “out of control” kids who behave poorly and make bad decisions. What these facts should lead to instead is a sober assessment of the structural and systemic causes of these poor outcomes for youth of color. Furthermore, the structural inequality in our society has had a traumatic impact on our communities and our young people in particular. In order to break this cycle we must understand the relationship between trauma and inequality more clearly.

Dr. James Garbarino, a professor at Loyola University in Chicago, has coined the term “social toxicity,” saying that, like physical environments, social environments can be poisonous, containing “threats to the development of identity, competence, moral reasoning, trust, hope, and the other features of personality and ideology that make for success in school, family, work, and the community.”¹⁴ Drawing on this idea, Dr. Shawn Ginwright has developed a framework for thinking about social change called “Healing Justice.” Dr. Ginwright, a seasoned youth development practitioner and a Professor in the Africana Studies Department at San Francisco State University, posits that healing must be an integrated part of any viable social change strategy because communities that have experienced structural oppression and inequality have also experienced trauma and harm as a result.

Drs. Ginwright and Garbarino both drive home the point that trauma can occur not just at the individual level, but also at the level of community and society, and that people can experience trauma at both levels simultaneously. An example of this might be the trauma of a child whose father is incarcerated. The child experiences the trauma of separation from her parent and the social shame, economic hardship, and stress associated

¹⁴ Dr. James Garbarino, “The Challenge of Parenting in a Socially Toxic Environment” (Abstract), <http://helpingfamilieschange.org/garbarino-takes-on-social-toxicity/>

her father's incarceration. But the quality of her trauma might be compounded if, for example, this child were just one of many in her community with a parent in prison—a situation driven in low-income communities of color by discriminatory and unequal policies and practices in the criminal justice system. Not only would this individual child have to suffer through and struggle with her own parent's incarceration, but the shared nature of the trauma with others in her community would further compromise her and her peers' ability to develop in a healthy and supported manner.

Rather than simply understanding trauma as the experience of a single individual at a particular time and place, Drs. Ginwright and Garbarino help us to understand that trauma can be caused by a social policy or social force (e.g., an abusive police force), and that its impact can be felt not only by individual survivors but by entire communities as collective trauma.

The youth and young adults that I work with at Urban Peace Movement have lost multiple friends and family members to gun violence. Their parents and caretakers have struggled, unsupported, with substance abuse or mental health issues. Many youth have had parents or siblings who were incarcerated, and some have been incarcerated themselves. They have suffered as their loved ones were deported. And, many have endured homelessness and hunger. These experiences are all traumatic, and they stem directly from social and economic policies that perpetuate inequality. These are not isolated incidents or freak accidents, and the result is that entire communities are traumatized together. Each of these young people ends up even more hurt than he or she would have been had their suffering been theirs alone. This social trauma stands in the way of our ability to create and sustain deep social change in communities of color. As social workers like to say, "Hurt people hurt people." But the opposite must also be true. Healthy people build healthy communities.

Oppression and inequality simultaneously inflict trauma at both the individual and social levels. We cannot mend one set of wounds without mending the other, too. We must build the capacity to heal and transform the individuals in our communities—our fathers and mothers, our children, our siblings and cousins. We must also transform the unfair, inequitable systems that continue to inflict shared trauma and feed the cycle of violence and mass incarceration in our communities. We need “Healing-Centered Youth Organizing.”

Social Change from the Inside Out: The Genesis of Urban Peace Movement

In 2006, I was working at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. It was a particularly violent year in our city, with nearly 150 homicides. It really hit home for me when the 21-year old son of one of the Ella Baker Center’s adult members was murdered in Oakland. As a community organizer, I had dedicated my life to making Oakland a better, safer, more equitable place. But after this young man died, I began to question my own commitment to social justice work, and I fell into a brief period of depression. I felt sad, demoralized, and unsure about what to do next. I began having conversations with others, mostly younger people and some of my peers, about their thoughts on the violence in our neighborhoods. Many of these people expressed a level of numbness or despair that mirrored my own.

By providence, coincidence, or fate, I was introduced to the idea of “mindfulness practice” around this same time. I attended a workshop where we talked about ways of *being* as opposed to ways of *doing*, about shaping our reality by shaping our sense of possibility. These were strange, interesting, exciting concepts—very far removed from my day-to-day activity as a community organizer, which revolved around checklists and benchmarks and measurable objectives. Using these new ideas to look at my own life, I realized that, as much as what I was *doing* was aimed at making a better life for the people

in my community, my way of *being* was grounded in a fundamental hopelessness. And I realized that if I added to this hopelessness the other feelings of numbness and despair I had heard from people around me, and then multiplied that by thousands of other people in Oakland, then peace really had no chance at all.

Feeling called to confront my own hopelessness, I decided to create the possibility of *being courageous*. But once I had made that decision, I was at a loss for what to do next. Choosing courage is great, but it doesn't magically conjure a work-plan or a set of short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

One day very soon after, I was driving down the street and happened to pass three intersections each with a small peace vigil calling for an end to the war abroad. The vigils were simple and attended by a small number of activists, most of them white. I was moved by the simplicity of their action and the feelings of solidarity that the vigils evoked. I thought to myself, "Why don't we do the same thing for the violence happening here in our own backyard, with youth of color from the Oakland "flatlands" instead of older white activists?"

I went back to my office the next day with a proposal to coordinate three simultaneous "Silence The Violence" vigils in various parts of Oakland. It was ambitious, but we felt inspired, and started putting the word out to others in our network.

Within three weeks, and with the help of our allies the San Francisco based United Playaz Organization, the "ambitious" trio of vigils grew to a seemingly unimaginable 21. Twenty-one Silence The Violence vigils happened in five Bay Area cities; and the cities of Richmond, Oakland, and San Francisco declared it "Silence The Violence Day." More than 2,000 people attended our vigils, and one of the largest hip-hop radio stations in California broadcast the event live.

At this point, I had been organizing for many years. I had won impressive campaigns and watched the young people I worked with grow into amazing, beautiful people. But I had

never witnessed something with as much velocity as this first set of Silence The Violence vigils. It was as if this Silence The Violence Day had a momentum of its own. Soon, Silence The Violence was an ongoing project at Ella Baker Center. Within three years, Silence The Violence left the nest of the Ella Baker Center to become Urban Peace Movement, where I still work today. From that first day of 21 vigils, I began to see what is possible when what we choose to *do* is empowered by whom we choose to *be*. It has shown me what we can accomplish when we confront our own despair and resignation and choose courage instead.

My experience with both Silence The Violence and Urban Peace Movement has led me to develop a new theory of social change that might best be described as an “inside-out” approach. The conventional theory of social change focuses almost entirely on structural policy change and grassroots organizing—in other words, change in the world outside of ourselves. But I became interested in how “inner” transformational work could impact the outer world. I believe that combining a “inside-out” perspective with a more conventional social change methodology can create a multi-dimensional approach that will yield far better results both for individual people and for communities as a whole. For too long I limited myself by not taking full advantage of all of the tools available to me. This new, multi-dimensional approach has created a space where breakthroughs and innovations can occur.

My work certainly continues to have hurdles and challenges. But in facing these challenges, I find I have access to a level of power and resiliency that I wasn't aware of before. I have seen, first hand, the way that inner practice can impact the outer world. And, while this theory might be new for me, I have come to understand that, in fact, it is an old theory of social change – one that was used by the likes of Dr. King, Gandhi, Howard Thurman, and countless others who were able to exert such powerful influence over the course of history.

Healing and Transformation vs. Systems Change and Organizing

As an activist and youth organizer who deeply values the power of healing and transformation, I have come to see that “healing” and “social change” sometimes seem to occupy two clear, distinct spaces that have very little intentional relationship with one another. Some people work to help others heal from their trauma and transform themselves. Some people dedicate themselves to grassroots organizing and changing the social and economic systems that shape our lives. And though each space is imperative to any serious effort to create social change and transform our society, only a few people work in both. It’s not hard to understand why that might be. It is easy for someone focused on healing and inner transformation to argue that we can’t heal society’s ills until we heal our own. Another way to describe this perspective is “heal first, organize later.” The problem is that the “later” never seems to happen, which means that the systems of inequality continue to traumatize our communities, and the healing work never ends, never succeeds for more than a short time. And it is easy for someone focused on organizing and systems change to argue that the world has huge and urgent challenges that won’t wait for us to heal ourselves. We could name this the “we’re too busy to heal” perspective. But if we don’t heal the damage that’s been done to us, we burn ourselves out and often replicate the very dynamics we are trying to stop, hurting ourselves and hurting each other. After all, hurt people hurt people.

Too often these two orientations work as if at cross-purposes. Though limited—especially when taken all the way to their logical conclusions—both are keyed in to important, indispensable truths. It can be difficult to hold both perspectives at once. I myself have vacillated between them in my 18 years in this work—sometimes seemingly from day to day. But a third perspective—one that integrates healing and transformation with organizing and systems change—is beginning to emerge, both for me personally and in the field at large.

Like anyone who has spent years organizing on the ground and campaigning with almost no break, I have worked to the point of fatigue and burnout—the harmful side effects of the “too busy to heal” perspective. Healing and transformational practice have enabled me to access the inspiration and creativity necessary to keep me in the work. I am better able to support the young people I work with. Rather than undercutting my organizing, the time and energy I’ve invested in healing and transformation have made me fall even more deeply in love with organizing. I see, in a way I didn’t before, that organizing is part of the healing process. Every day I understand more clearly that we must do both healing and organizing work because structural inequality will continue to re-traumatize entire communities until we are able to transform our society to one based in equity and shared prosperity.

Rayna’s Story

One of the people who has taught me deep and lasting lessons about the need for Healing-Centered Youth Organizing is a young woman named Rayna. When I met Rayna she was 16 and had already suffered more loss than some experience in their entire lives. Her neighborhood in North Oakland was once solidly working-class and African American but is rapidly being gentrified. In 1993, when Rayna was just 18-months old, her mother fell victim to gun violence, shot while pregnant with Rayna’s younger brother. Her mother was put on life-support so that the baby could be brought to term, but she never recovered from her injuries. Then, when Rayna was about 12-years old, her father’s girlfriend was murdered, and her uncle was killed on the street where she still lives today. As a teenager, Rayna lost countless friends and peers to violence. On her 16th birthday, she opened her front door and saw her childhood friend lying on the ground surrounded by a large group of people. A police officer had shot and killed him.

It was shortly after this that I first met Rayna. A friend encouraged her to join Silence The Violence (which would grow into Urban Peace Movement). Rayna tells us now that she was reluctant to come because, based on her experiences up to that point, she had trouble believing that peace was even possible. When her friend invited her, she thought our program would be “one of those places where you go and adults tell you that you are a bad person.” But thankfully—for her and for us—that is not what happened. Instead, she saw peers and adults working together, respecting each other, trying to find a path out of the vicious cycle of violence. Over time, she came to participate regularly. She attended community events and trainings. She went on retreats with us. Soon she was one of our most committed young people. In Silence The Violence/Urban Peace Movement she found a new community of support, and in our trainings she learned skills and tools that [she says] “helped me calm down.” Outside of our meetings, she sought grief counseling. All of these things made a big difference in Rayna’s life. She began to open herself up to the possibility of happiness, daring to be vulnerable in the way that only a hopeful person can.

Based on this foundation of healing, Rayna entered into her first organizing campaign with our organization—a coalitional effort to secure a “community jobs agreement” for a large redevelopment project in Oakland expected to create thousands of new jobs. After attending her first City Council meeting, Rayna came back to our other youth and said something like, “Did you guys know that there’s a room over there where a group of people decide about things that affect our lives, like what the police can or can’t do and what type of jobs are going to come to this city?”

During the campaign, Rayna discovered she had a knack for public speaking and the ability to quickly understand complex public policy arguments. She got up at that first City Council meeting and gave a two-minute testimony so powerful that the Council President actually interrupted the next speaker to call Rayna back up to the podium. He

then paused the meeting to thank her personally for her remarks.

Rayna emerged as one of the lead spokespeople for the Campaign for Quality Jobs. Our coalition, Revive Oakland,¹⁵ ended up winning a landmark jobs policy providing for a community-based job center, living wages, protections for formerly incarcerated workers, and local hire, among other things.

Through the campaign, Rayna learned that her voice could help shift Oakland's trajectory. And if her voice was powerful enough to change the course of local history, it could also transform her own life. Rayna landed a job shortly thereafter and she literally walks taller now than before. It was community organizing that gave her back to herself, helping her rediscover that which she had lost touch with in all of her trauma. She found her voice and her own power through organizing, and that is a critical part of the healing process.

Today, Rayna is a powerful, dynamic, self-assured 22-year-old. Like most young adults, she is still finding her way. But she has a sense of confidence and conviction that sets her apart. Working with Rayna has been a pleasure and a privilege, and I wish that I could take credit for the person she has become and is becoming, but she did it herself. All we did was create the space for her leadership to emerge. In return, she has reminded me time and time again of why I fell in love with the power of organizing in the first place. And she has reinforced the lesson I started to learn with those first 21 vigils—organizing and healing are not separate or competing things. They are intricately bound together, and together they will help us achieve the freedom we know is possible.

Transformative Organizing: Beginning to Reconcile “Inner” with “Outer”

¹⁵ Revive Oakland is a coalition in Oakland led by the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy. See <http://www.workingeastbay.org/article.php?list=classt&type=75&class=20&type=75>

A new model for social justice is emerging from organizers around the country who are coming up against the limitations of conventional social justice organizing models and who understand the enormity of what is required to create a just, equitable, and sustainable society. Social Justice Leadership, a training organization, calls this new model “Transformative Organizing”.¹⁶

Transformative Organizing suggests that we can create an approach to social justice work that simultaneously transforms both inequitable “external” political, economic, and social structures and institutions, *and* the “internal” perspectives of the people who are participating in the social change work itself. Social Justice Leadership thinks this will allow us to increase our efficacy as a movement and create lasting, transformative change that will end the cycle of violence and trauma endemic to systemic oppression. Transformative Organizing aims to do no less than help us create a new world beyond what we can even imagine today.

What is particularly interesting about the Transformative Organizing model is its examination of the relationship between *oppression* (described as the sum of the systemic or external conditions which create inequality in our society) and *suffering* (the internal experiences such as stress or anxiety that can result from living under oppression). Transformative Organizing suggests that we are caught in a vicious cycle where internal suffering leads people to create oppressive policies and institutions, and in turn, oppressive policies and institutions create more internal suffering.

So how do we break this cycle? What I find so amazing and hopeful about this model is its insight that, even though systemic oppression facilitates and encourages human suffering, the *root* of suffering is not actually externally generated, but rather an

¹⁶ Transformative Organizing: Towards the Liberation of Self & Society;
<http://sojustlead.org/sites/default/files/resources/SJLTransformativeOrganizing.pdf>

internal perspective on, or interpretation of, external oppression. The fact that the root of suffering is internally generated means that it is possible to find (or, rather, generate) hope and freedom even in the face of oppression and violence. Social Justice Leadership's Transformative Organizing concept paper draws explicitly on the example of Nelson Mandela, who was able to stay hopeful even in the face of decades of imprisonment for his political beliefs and his anti-apartheid activities.

As organizers committed to transforming the systems and institutions that perpetuate inequality and oppression, we can and must begin to do our work with an internal sense of hope, freedom, peace of mind, and well being, from a place of sufficiency and prosperity, even when our social conditions and the social conditions of our communities are not yet there. In other words, we can use what we already have inside of us—our own inner sense of resiliency, our love for one another, and our hearts—to transform ourselves, each other, and society. We can begin to help each other and help people in our communities heal from the wounds of the past so that we can fully access our inner power as we work to change our society.

“Reimagining Everything”: The Genesis of a New World

Up to this point, this paper has largely focused on the relationship between healing and youth organizing. However at a more fundamental level, it is an examination of the interplay between “the inner” (or some might say “the spiritual”) dimension and the “outer” (or material) world within the context of social change work. From this perspective I think that it is important to examine one other issue related to social change that is different from but not unrelated to community organizing & advocacy. The area that I am referring to is that of “innovation and social enterprise.”

I recently had dinner with a friend who has a deep spiritual practice. In describing the

relationship between the “inner” and the “outer”, she told me that she believes that a new world is being born and that it is emerging from ‘inside of us,’ from our inner sense of creativity, from what we feel most passionate about, and from whom we feel most called to be. I have had my own experiences of that which she was describing - in those small moments of stillness and in the quiet times. Sometimes, when I am still and in the present moment, I have the feeling that something is trying to be born into the world through me – and that this “new world” or new sense of possibility is bubbling up just below the surface through the tender and vulnerable parts of our humanity, through the brokenness. Somehow, all of this reminds me of what activist Grace Lee Boggs says about this being a time for “reimagining everything.”

Boggs, who lives in Detroit among the crumbling factories and former auto plants, among the ruins of the giants of the industrial age, has said over and over that she believes that we are on the cusp of a kind of transition equivalent to that which humans made when we went from being hunter-gatherers to living in an industrial society. And Boggs suggests that this shift is happening both “inside people” and also with the institutions and structures that make up the “outside” world. She talks about reimagining the ways in which we think about everything – even the ways that we talk about revolution. She points out that the word “revolution” contains within it, the word “evolution.” Just like the proponents of Transformative Organizing, she argues for a new social change methodology that transforms us as human beings at the same time that it transforms our political and economic structures. Boggs says that this is the process of evolution. But unlike the Transformative Organizers who spend most of their time working on policy change and advocacy, Boggs now spends much of her time supporting local grassroots community-based enterprises such as urban farms and neighborhood bike shops in her hometown of

Detroit.¹⁷

A conversation about the ideas of “social enterprise” and “social innovation” is gaining traction in progressive circles of late. I must admit that I have met this conversation with a great deal of skepticism. I feel reluctant about the notion that business can fix our social problems when, after all, wasn’t it big business that got us into these problems in the first place? And even though I did found a non-profit organization I don’t think of myself as an “entrepreneur.” I identify instead as an “organizer” and a “social change-maker.” Additionally, I worry that the framework of “social enterprise” often fails to acknowledge the need for us to challenge the fundamental political and economic structures that have to be confronted if we are to create the space for real change to come about. The social and economic challenges that we face can’t all be solved in the private sector alone.

And, while I continue to hold these reservations, Grace Lee Boggs’ approach has made me think differently. Boggs is pointing us toward something that cannot be overlooked, something that we must make room for in addition to the work of organizing and advocacy – something that is bigger than just a shift in our economy. Boggs is pointing to a shift that is taking place, *both* on a material / institutional level and on a humanistic (or some might argue spiritual) level. From a material or structural perspective, we see (particularly in places like Detroit) that a new window of opportunity has opened in the wake of the partial economic collapse of some of the mega-institutions that once served as pillars of U.S. society. We can offer up alternatives into this window for as long as it stays open.

From a spiritual perspective, we know that when something that once was collapses, a clearing for new possibility then arises. This clearing is an opening for people to step into that which they feel most called to do and that which they feel most passionate about. It is

¹⁷ “American Revolutionary: The evolution of Grace Lee Boggs,” a film produced and directed by Grace Lee, 2013; <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2385558/>

an opportunity for us to begin to serve our own communities in ways that are much more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable and in ways that bring us joy and fulfillment. Most types of spiritual and contemplative practice lead us to a place of presence where we can more clearly see our own gifts, talents, and passions. When we step up to be who we feel authentically called to be then we begin to bring the new world into being.

These ideas of “social enterprise” and “social innovation” are difficult to overlook when we consider that, for many “high opportunity” youth of color, living in poverty has been one of the most difficult and defining things that they have had to contend with – not having stable housing, not being able to provide for their families and young children. In addition to organizing and policy advocacy, we must also make room to assert the creativity, passion, and resourcefulness, the “street intellectualism,” held by young people from our neighborhoods, into the space that this fairly recent partial economic collapse has left. We must take a much more serious look at models such as community initiated worker-owned cooperatives that can meet the needs of people with a product or service, create jobs and an economic base for poverty stricken communities of color, and create a “ready-made” base for organizing and power-building.

Recommendations

In order to truly transform our communities, here in California and around the country, we must be courageous enough to make a real investment (of our time, our money, our commitment, and our love) in the leadership of our young people. We must create a leadership pipeline for “high opportunity” youth of color in acknowledgement of experiences, their assets, and their capacity to lead. This will require supports that are specifically aligned with the needs and concerns of these youth in particular. Additionally, we must provide training and support for the youth-service workers and youth organizers who support these

young people. Ultimately, our job is to give young people the space to lead.

The model of “Healing-Centered Youth Organizing” that I am describing takes a three-pronged approach, which includes the following:

- **Healing & Transformation** – This includes the work of helping our communities and our young people to heal from the personal and social trauma that they have experienced, as well as the work of empowering people from the “Inside-Out” to determine and manifest a new course of history. From “Transformative Organizing” to the practice of sacred healing circles within social change organizations like the Milpa Movement (Salinas), the Determination and CURYJ programs (Oakland), and Fathers and Families of San Joaquin (Stockton) - there more and more groups emerging around the country who are working in various ways to integrate healing with traditional organizing and policy advocacy.
- **Political Engagement, Advocacy, & Organizing** – The work of social change requires us to pay attention to the “rules of the game.” What are these rules? Who sets them? Who implements them? Who benefits from them? And, how do we influence these rules in such a way that they yield more just and equitable communities toward the good of all? Community organizing and youth organizing are fundamentally about challenging the current political and economic structures that perpetuate inequality and maintain the status quo. Young people are organizing and speaking truth to power in places around the country on issues such as immigration reform, education, juvenile and criminal justice, and racial and economic inequality. In Oakland, young people are helping to lead the charge on the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula, on public safety and re-entry, and on helping to advocate for quality jobs for residents of our city.

- **Building Alternative Economic Models** – In addition to policy advocacy and community organizing, the work of structural change also requires us to begin to build economic alternatives to the old models that put profit over people and locked so many of our community members out of opportunity and into poverty. All over the country small community-based enterprises are popping up such as urban farms, bakeries, neighborhood art galleries, music studios, and the like. As a movement, we can begin to create the kind of community sustaining, grassroots institutions that can serve as the foundation of the new world we want to bring forth.

Conclusion

One of the most well known passages from the Bible reads, “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”¹⁸ The conventional interpretation of this passage relates directly to the role that “high opportunity” youth of color can and should play in the process of social change. In this conventional interpretation, the passage tells us that those who have been cast out to the margins of our society will eventually be the ones that lead. But I have come to see that this passage may hold another simultaneous meaning.

In the old, materialist view of the world, we put *things* first and people last. We believed that if we *had* enough of whatever it was that we thought we needed (money, fame, status, etc.) then it would make us out to *be* better people. That turned out not to be the case. A new view is emerging which says that we should start first by paying attention to who we are “being” and let who we are *being* guide our actions and our decisions which will, in turn, help us to *have* a better society and a better world – one that benefits all of us. In this way we will put what was once first last and what was last first.

¹⁸ The Holy Bible; The New Testament; Matthew 20:16

Social change organizations must start to take our role as “generators” of hope and optimism much more seriously. We must claim our victories, no matter how small, whether victories over violence and despair, personal victories, or political and economic victories. These seemingly small wins will help us build the momentum and capacity required to create a movement strong enough to restore balance to our society. Wins generate hope. And, hope carries with it a certain kind of momentum that adds a ‘boost’ to our capacity to bring forth new possibilities and new realities into this world.

I don’t think of my own “practice,” my own healing, as something entirely separate from the social justice work that I am involved in. As much as possible I work to integrate them. And, over time, I have come to see that my social justice work has become part of my practice. I believe that the work of social change, the work of reimagining our world, is sacred.

The time has come for us to put the best of what is inside of us forward, to pay more attention to who we are being, to begin to live into our own greatness. High-opportunity youth of color deserve our compassion and our commitment. If Grace Lee Boggs is right then this is a high stakes time, a time of great peril and great opportunity, a “make it or break it” time for humanity. We can no longer afford to ignore the leadership and the creativity of our most precious asset – our young people.