



CONSCIOUS LEADERSHIP IN POLARIZED TIMES

**WINTER 2023 POLICY MEETING
JANUARY 20-21, WASHINGTON, DC**

This interactive session supports Mayors in focusing on developing interracial solidarity for equity in the midst of growing polarization. Mayors will share and discuss the challenges facing their cities and towns, reflect on the role of bias in polarization, hear the lived experiences of Mayor colleagues, and practice the four-step consciousness-raising process to address racism in their communities.



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Dr. Annice E. Fisher

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Collusion Smothers Progress

Ignoring Unjust Behaviors Keeps Oppression Alive



Brett Sayles (Pexels)

We've all been there before, you've witnessed an unjust act like racism and you want to interject with that powerful statement to change the status quo *yet* you find yourself silent, nodding, or laughing in complicity with the very action that you wanted to disrupt.

After the moment passes, you may find yourself immersed in feelings of shame and guilt and thinking “I cannot believe I did it again. Why didn’t I speak up?”

Recently, I’ve seen this type of behavior keep well-meaning individuals and organizations in a recursive loop of *Conscious Collusion*.

Unless we break our daily habits of remaining silent in the midst of oppression, we will continue to consciously smother progress towards creating a more socially just world.

If you’re ready to dig deeper into *your* conscious collusion and learn how to disrupt it, then keep reading.

What is Conscious Collusion?

Conscious Collusion is the process of *knowingly participating* in practices that sustain inequity and harm against marginalized identities. It happens when:

you know that a policy, practice, or action is inequitable or oppressive *yet* you choose to use your power and choice to remain silent.

you *resist* changing your personal behaviors to adhere to policies and practices that seek to advance equity across identity groups such as race, class, gender, etc.

Examples of conscious collusion include:

Actively taking a stance against adding diversity and inclusion standards to staff job descriptions, evaluations, and promotion guidelines.

Remaining silent when a colleague of color experiences dehumanizing behavior in a team meeting.

Being unwilling to adjust your behaviors when someone informs you about your bias.

Ignoring other people’s accounts of inequity and racial harm by changing the subject or offering perfectly logical explanations (PLEs).

Each incident of unchecked collusion keeps us stuck in recursive loops of harm that inflicts pain on survivors of oppressive violence, sustains our self-deception, and oxygenates oppression's fire.

How Conscious Collusion Smothers Progress

Collusion creates roadblocks to a fair and just world and stunts people from rising to a higher version of self. Let's be honest in order to become an anti-racist, anti-sexist, or any other resistor of oppression requires rising into a higher level of self. *It requires non-conformity to the world standards of minding your own business.* It requires a complete transformation of your mindset, emotions, and behaviors. It requires speaking up in a room full of people that may outcast you. It requires refusing to participate in systems that perpetuate inequity and the status quo. While it may seem daunting to live and lead from this perspective, *it must become our norm* if we plan to advance social justice.

Progress hinges upon YOU

To stop smothering yourself and others, you must deal with the *fear and doubt* that drives your conscious collusion. Oftentimes, people collude due to fear of losing privileges or fear of rejection. Since most don't want to feel either, we choose to operate out of fear. We ignore the signals to trust ourself to take difficult yet brave actions towards social justice. It takes an act of *love and trust*, to resist the temptation to collude with unjust behaviors. Trusting your voice and your ability to speak out against oppression is one of the greatest acts of love.

Progress hinges upon living this truth, you always have the power and choice to resist collusion. It's up to you to decide to use it.

In an effort to disrupt this harmful practice, I leave you with three ways to support your progression to stop consciously colluding: a reflective tool to discern why you collude, a process for healing & reconciling, and the 4-step consciousness-raising process™ to prevent in-the-moment collusion.

Step 1: Reflect on *Why do I collude?*

Pick a recent incident where you consciously colluded with inequity. Without judging yourself, take time to journal your responses to these questions:

What fear and doubt drove me to collude with inequity?

What do I feel like I'm losing by speaking up?

How can those losses benefit a greater cause?

How can I make peace with the losses?

What tools or resources can I use to build my confidence to speak up?

Step 2: Heal & Reconcile

Acknowledge what happened and accept that you had a lapse in judgement.

Identify the shame and guilt felt from not speaking up.

Forgive yourself for falling short — this doesn't have to be how the story ends.

Identify what you learned from Step 1 that can bolster your trust in self.

Make Amends with yourself and others.

Firmly commit to speaking up next time.

Ask a trusted friend or family member to hold you accountable to your commitment.

Step 3: Raising Your Consciousness

Use the 4-step consciousness-raising™ process to be more thoughtful about the equity impact (fairness and justice) of your daily interactions with others.

Choice

In the moment, ask: how do I want to use my power, to treat people fair and just or to harm them with consciously collusive actions?

Presence

Pause and notice: how am I currently using my power?

Self-Awareness

Go deeper to understand: are my thoughts, emotions, and behaviors advancing or stifling equity?

Intentionality

Decide how you want to act: how can I use this interaction to contribute to our global goal of creating a more socially just world?

Now, love yourself enough, to trust your decision to disrupt unjust behaviors.

What's Your Choice?



Brent Sayles (Pexels)

There is no turning back. The world is at a pivotal moment in history. You are at a pivotal moment in your history. Are you going to continue consciously colluding with oppression or will you use your power and choice to disrupt it?



Dr. Annice E. Fisher

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Jul 8, 2020 · 8 min read · ✨ · 🎧 Listen

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Shifting Our Consciousness for Racial Equity

Healing Requires Honesty



Image by [Vlada Karpovich](#)

It's time for a shift in the way we talk about racial bias. I want to challenge us to be more courageous and maximize the moment. We need to move beyond using unconscious bias as a default for classifying incidents of racial bias. I know this will ruffle some feathers. To show you that I'm willing to take my *own* advice, I'm issuing this challenge even though I used the

default in a former article on Anti-Blackness. If we're serious about uprooting racism and Anti-Black racism during this revolution, then we must speak truth to power. Racial healing requires raising our consciousness past the age-old intent v. impact debate generated with the unconscious bias narrative. If companies are stepping up to the challenge to disrupt systemic racism, then we must also examine our individual choices.

Why the bias isn't so unconscious

Harvard's Project Implicit Bias defines implicit bias as a preference based on associations that develop in one's unconscious awareness and "that may even be contradictory to what one consciously believes." They argue this implicit process releases a person's preferences from being deemed prejudice. I'm challenged by this rationale because most examples of unconscious racial bias involve people using their consciousness to select preferences based in White racial norms. It is possible for a non-racist person to perpetuate racist mindsets and behaviors. Here's how we see it happen everyday:

- preferencing White women to fill diversity board seats instead of people of color
- choosing to take another elevator because an Arab man will ride alone with you
- promoting a White U.S. born male for a client-facing role versus the Latino male with English as his second language (rationale: clients may misunderstand him)
- suspending Black girls in schools at a higher rate than other kids

In each example, when confronted, most people usually say, I am not racist. "I don't see color" and "I treat everyone the same" become common reframes to prove their inability to exhibit racist behaviors. If we're honest, in each case, the person consciously discriminated against people of color based on a set of individual racial preferences. Some might argue that these examples affirm two types of unconscious bias, confirmation bias and affinity bias. Maybe ~~stating~~ stating the obvious BUT for something to be confirmed or for someone to have affinity, you have to make an intentional comparison. Until we stop dancing around White fragility, we won't be able to speak the truth in love and disrupt these toxic behaviors. Unless unconscious bias is explained as an entry point to addressing racism, as suggested by Benson and Fiarman, we run the risk of inflicting more harm than good. If we know in our hearts-of-hearts, that these are conscious acts of racial bias, then WHY do we keep using this term? Why do we

continue to sugarcoat racism to make White people and people of color that collude with racism feel comfortable about participating in racist behaviors? Every time we perpetuate this lie, we keep racism alive and give explicit racial bias the “unconscious bias” pass that cheats our friends, family, and colleagues from rising to live as the highest version of themselves. We are at a unique point in history where White people *want* to know their bias and are craving to learn how to disrupt it, we should capitalize on this moment by being more direct.

Why we need to speak truth to power

The truth sets us free. If there's one thing we've learned during this revolution: the US can no longer run from its original sin of racism. From the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Andres Guardado, to the recent setting of a Black woman on fire in Madison, Wisconsin, we need to heighten our urgency to deal with the domestic terrorism against people of color. Racial bias leads to catastrophic and sometimes deadly consequences. These acts steal people's lives, dreams, and sanity. If we don't tell the truth, we will continue to pour salt into an open wound for people of color. We will continue to weave the webs that hold racism together, becoming the fabric of our individual, cultural, and systemic experiences. When we immediately dismiss racial bias as implicit because a person claims that they do not believe they're capable of committing a racist act, we fall into the intent v. impact dynamic. As I tell my clients, if we spend the bulk of the time explaining away the intention, the perpetrator misses the learning opportunity and we continue to harm the person that survived the racial bias. When we fail to tell the truth, we miss a chance to tell those closest to us that racism lives within them and is causing them to consciously betray their core values.

If we say we love humanity and justice, then we cannot be complicit to mindsets and behaviors used to oppress people of color. Dismantling racism means we validate people of color's lived experiences and disrupt the current practice of asking them to write a dissertation to prove that racial bias occurred. It's hard for racial healing to occur when the conversations begin in denial and remain rooted in it.

Racial healing begins with making a choice

We always have power and choice. It's up to us to decide if we want to use them. In each moment you can choose to disrupt or maintain the status quo of labeling intentional acts of racism as unconscious bias. If we want to create a racially just world, then we must be honest about the ways racism shows up in our lives. We saw an example of this when L'Oréal publicly recanted and sought to repair the racial harm done to model Munroe Bergdorf. To support my request to become more brave in our quest for racial healing, I want to end with a resource. I offer my four-step consciousness-raising process™ as a tool for disrupting racial bias from three vantage points.

4-Step Consciousness-Raising Tool for Interrupting Racial Bias

I start all of my work with power and choice because it is the precursor to bold action. Change starts with making a choice to trust yourself and believing that you're capable of trying your best solution in the moment. This act of love silences fear and doubt and channels bravery to disrupt racism.

For bystanders:

- **Choice:** Choose to believe that you are capable and trust yourself enough to speak out against racial bias.
- **Presence:** Be ready to slow down and seize the moment.
- **Self-awareness:** Go inward and ask why am I bothered by what I just witnessed? What in your spirit led you to believe that racial bias occurred? How can my honesty help heal both the perpetrator and survivor?
- **Intentionality:** Trust yourself enough to take the greatest act of love and speak up. Check in on the survivor: Affirm their experience and ask what you can do to support them. Inform them of your plans to speak to the perpetrator.
- **Share with the perpetrator:** I've known you to be a fair person but _____ action mimicked racial bias in _____ way and _____ was the impact on me and how I saw _____ react. I want to learn more about what prompted this behavior and how we can learn from each other and repair the harm done to _____. For speaking up in the moment, [view this example](#).

For survivors of bias:

- **Choice:** Choose to believe yourself. You are not insane. Trust yourself and your spirit. You experienced racial bias and I know it hurts. You were treated unfairly and it's not okay.
- **Presence:** Slow down and check-in with yourself. Take time to tend to yourself. You do not have to ignore the incident or act like business as usual.
- **Self-awareness:** Ask yourself what am I feeling? What happened? What do I need to feel comfortable again? What was the injustice I experienced? What do I need to heal?
- **Intentionality:** Decide if you want to speak up. It's okay to take time to make that decision. This is an act of courage and vulnerability. If you choose to report it or speak up, you can use this framing:

- *Situation* (describe what happened), *Behavior* (describe the biased behavior), *Impact* (describe the impact on you). Feel free to ask the person to help you to understand what warranted their behavior as well as share your boundaries for reconciliation. Whether you chose to speak up or not, know that you do not need another person to validate your experience, believe in your truth. For speaking up in the moment, [view this example](#).

For perpetrators:

- **Choice:** I believe you can change if you want to. You have to choose to release the fear and let love win. Make the choice to trust the truth of the impact of your racially biased behavior. One action does not make you a racist. Learning how you perpetuate racism is the first step to detoxifying it from your life.
- **Presence:** Slow down and honor everyone's humanity. Check in with yourself. Be honest and admit your mistake. Sit with it and know that you have the power to make amends and seek reconciliation.
- **Self-awareness:** Ask yourself what am I feeling? What did I do? What mindset led me to behave this way? Where did the mindset come from? How did my actions hurt _____ person? How did this action betray my values? Why is it important for me to lean into the discomfort and learn from the survivor?
- **Intentionality:** Decide to repent and heal. Make amends with yourself for betraying your values. Make amends and apologize to those you hurt. Inquire about the impact of your actions. Seek reconciliation by asking how you can repair the harm. Be prepared to hear what they have to say and be ready with your own ideas for reconciliation. This is an act of courage and vulnerability. Taking this step will help you learn how to use your power to unlearn racist behaviors. You may also need to enroll in additional learning opportunities to expand your awareness. Rest in this: everytime you accept responsibility and change, you cut the web of racism.

In the words of our living civil rights shero, [Dolores Huerta](#), *Sí se puede!* I believe we can dismantle the web woven by acts of racial bias. It starts with everyone using their power and choice to speak and honor the truth. Each of our acts creates the ripple needed to uproot racism. As [bell hooks](#) eloquently challenged, “resistance begins with confronting pain, whether it’s yours or someone else’s and wanting to do something to change it.” Let’s continue the momentum of the current resistance by confronting the racial pain of people of color. Let’s build on the current momentum of racial healing by properly labeling racial bias. I believe this revolution is different. Let’s honor it by *actually* speaking truth to power.



Betsy Hodges

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Aug 3, 2022 · 4 min read · Listen



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A Crucial Trick Of Whiteness

One of the great tricks whiteness has played on white Americans since the Civil Rights Movement is to convince us that racism is merely a feeling in white people's hearts that is demonstrated by interpersonal actions. If we don't feel open antipathy in our hearts toward Global Majority and Indigenous people that we can recognize ourselves, then we cannot be behaving in a racist way. According to this belief, if racism is the sum total of those negative feelings and behaviors, then most liberal and progressive white people are and should be exempted from allegations of racism.

Here's the truth: animus in our hearts and consciously negative behavior are neither necessary *nor sufficient* to obtain disparate outcomes in our social systems.

What do I mean?

Until we change what the systems are set up to do, they will continue to operate to get the same results. If you build a train to go between Chicago and Minneapolis, that train will always, always, *always* go between Minneapolis and Chicago. You won't be able to get anywhere that isn't on that line. If you want to catch a train to Des Moines *you're going to have to build new train tracks*. Until we change what the system is for — from getting-to-Chicago to getting-to-Des-Moines — we will never create systems that are built to get a different result. In this scenario, it doesn't matter if every single train engineer loves Des Moines and really, truly wants everyone to be able to take a train to Des Moines. If the train tracks don't go there, you can't take a train there, no matter what Engineer Billie feels in her heart.

The same is true for any of our social systems. Take housing. Banks, with the cooperation of municipal ordinances, decided which neighborhoods qualified for home loans and which did not. The Federal government's GI Bill helped soldiers returning from WWII, mostly white soldiers, get low-rate mortgages. This led to an explosion of home-ownership among working-and middle-class white people and a significant expansion of the white middle class. This combination also widened a service and amenity gap between white and Black neighborhoods, and increased the wealth gap between white people and people of color.

The home-ownership systems in the US were explicitly set up for white people, at the expense of people of color (who were paying Federal taxes but not benefitting from the program), and to this day the overlay of those redlining maps predicts wealth, income, educational attainment, crime rates, health problems, and more in American cities. The policies that undergird our housing have not been changed enough to both serve Global Majority and Indigenous people equally, but they also have not been changed to make sure the results of past imbalanced policy are redressed.

I wrote about this dynamic and policing [here](#).

Not a single white person working in those systems has to feel racism in their hearts for those systems

...the important part of racism is why I contend it's the biggest trick whiteness has played in the last fifty years.

Staying comfortable with racism by distancing ourselves from its realities is one of the hallmarks of whiteness on the left. This trick — of focusing on how we feel in order to ignore systemic inequalities that lead to better outcomes for us as white people — is part of the smoke and mirrors we use with ourselves to stay dissociated from racism. Focusing on how we feel rather than the observable, material impacts of systems on Global Majority and Indigenous people also doubles down on centering the white experience in issues of race and racism.

We white people do get to heal and process our feelings about our whiteness, including any pulls we have to keep the comfort of the status quo. As a matter of fact, I believe it is required. We get to do that with one another, however, rather than burdening people of the Global Majority with our processes. (Stay tuned for the book I am writing about just how to do that.) In the meantime, the invitation to white people is to focus more on the systems of inequality and policies that will change them than we do on our feelings about race.

This is part of a series of pieces that explore what I have learned about whiteness, race, and human beings in the last 30 years. I am writing for readers, primarily white readers, who believe that racism exists and that it is bad, and I assume a basic level of understanding of racial concepts. A word about language: Currently I am using three phrases throughout these essays to encompass people of color, all of which are debated: “people of color”; “Black, Indigenous, and people of color/BIPOC”; and Global Majority and Indigenous people/GMI people”. All of them are meant to encompass the wide range of people, the majority of people around the world, who do not claim European heritage or who claim more than European heritage.

Some of the ideas in here have been and will be explored more fully in other pieces — please subscribe and come along for the ride!

As Mayor of Minneapolis, I Saw How White Liberals Block Change

But this revolutionary moment is inviting us to be a part of the solution.

July 9, 2020

By Betsy Hodges

Ms. Hodges was the mayor of Minneapolis from 2014 to 2018.



Democrats have largely led big and midsize cities for much of the past half-century. Yet the gaps in socioeconomic outcomes between white people and people of color are by several measures at their worst in the richest, bluest cities of the United States.

How could this be? Because high-profile cultural conservatives ask this question so disingenuously, white liberals have generally brushed aside this reality rather than grappled with its urgency. There's now a danger that this sidestepping will continue, even after a national evaluation of racism since the brutal police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

As the mayor of Minneapolis from 2014 to 2018, as a Minneapolis City Council member from 2006 until 2014 and as a white Democrat, I can say this: White liberals, despite believing we are saying and doing the right things, have resisted the systemic changes our cities have needed for decades. We have mostly settled for illusions of change, like testing pilot programs and funding volunteer opportunities.

These efforts make us feel better about racism, but fundamentally change little for the communities of color whose disadvantages often come from the hoarding of advantage by mostly white neighborhoods.

In Minneapolis, the white liberals I represented as a Council member and mayor were very supportive of summer jobs programs that benefited young people of color. I also saw them fight every proposal to fundamentally change how we provide education to those same young people. They applauded restoring funding for the rental assistance hotline. They also signed petitions and brought lawsuits against sweeping reform to zoning laws that would promote housing affordability and integration.

Nowhere is this dynamic of preserving white comfort at the expense of others more visible than in policing. Whether we know it or not, white liberal people in blue cities implicitly ask police officers to politely stand guard in predominantly white parts of town (where the downside of bad policing is usually inconvenience) and to aggressively patrol the parts of town where people of color live — where the consequences of bad policing are fear, violent abuse, mass incarceration and, far too often, death.

Underlying these requests are the flawed beliefs that aggressive patrolling of Black communities provides a wall of protection around white people and our property.

Police officers understand the dynamic well. We give them lethal tools and a lot of leeway to keep our parts of town safe (a mandate implicitly understood to be “safe from people of color.”) That leeway attracts people who want to misuse it.



Minneapolis Police Department officers monitoring a protest on June 11. Stephen Maturen/Getty Images

Minneapolis historically has some of the worst racial disparities in the country. When I was mayor, despite changes like instituting body cameras and investing more in training, policing outcomes for people of color never improved as much as I hoped. The disparities in arrest rates and use of force, for instance, remained glaringly high.

On Nov. 15, 2015, during my term as mayor, two Minneapolis police officers shot and killed Jamar Clark, an unarmed Black man. An 18-day encampment set up by protesters surrounding the grounds of the Fourth Police Precinct house followed.

But instead of greatly increasing police presence and needlessly arresting people for blocking the street or for having tents on public property, I decided to let the protests and encampment continue while we negotiated with protesters toward a more peaceful conclusion.

Minneapolis police officers, who were worried about the precinct house's being taken over and burned down (as the Third Precinct station was during last month's uprising), guarded the building and found themselves frustrated by what they saw as conflicting orders.

“They’ve got fires in the street!”

“They’re out there smoking weed. We can smell it in here.”

“They spray-painted the precinct!”

Acts that they would have arrested people for under normal circumstances. I heard complaints like this at every shift change I attended, shepherded inside by a security vehicle. Before long, I knew that if I didn't explain to the officers what exactly I was asking of them, we had little hope of safely and effectively saving the city from widespread unrest.

"Look," I told them. "You know what will happen if I let you go out there and just arrest people. There will be riots." I told them I wanted them to get home safely at the end of their shifts and to give us time to find a peaceful resolution.

I remember clearly one officer, a middle-aged white man, who is now a sergeant with the department, looking me dead in the eye and cursing me out in front of the entire room. I needed to take a walk in their shoes, he said, peppering his insults with profanity, so that I could "know what that's like." He complained of protesters' "calling us names, getting in our faces" and throwing objects at officers. And "you're letting them," he said.

The not fully said bottom line of his message was clear: White liberals like me ask the police to do our dirty work — dealing with the racial and economic inequities our policies create. Normally, we turn a blind eye to the harsh methods that many of them use to achieve our goal of order, pretend that isn't what we've done and then act surprised when their tough-guy behavior goes viral and gets renewed scrutiny.

Whatever else you want to say about police officers, they know — whether they articulate it neatly or not—that we are asking them to step into a breach left by our bad policies. The creation of more-just systems won't guarantee the prevention of atrocities. But the status quo in cities, created by white liberals, invites brutal policing.

Last month, a veto-proof majority of the Minneapolis City Council voted to alter the city's charter to disband the Police Department. The Council has since heard calls from residents, including many Black residents, to have "broad community input and a deliberate process before the charter change is put to voters."

Whatever the result, a sustainable transformation of policing will require that white people of means disinvest in the comfort of our status quo.

It will require support of policy changes that cities led by white liberals are currently using the blunt instrument of policing to address. It will mean organizing for structural changes that wealthy and middle-class whites have long feared — like creating school systems that truly give all children a chance, providing health care for everyone that isn't tied to employment, reconfiguring police unions and instituting public safety protocols that don't simply prioritize protecting white property and lives.

On the other side of these different choices is a better world for everyone, including us. For generations, white people have been trading genuine connectedness in the human family for the poor substitute of property values and perceived superiority. Some may think we have a lot to lose. But racial equity wouldn't be a loss for us. It would be a reclamation of our humanity.

White people, we are capable of accepting the invitation this moment has given us. If we find ways to make our actions match our beliefs this time around, the country will be far better off, and so will we.

Betsy Hodges was the mayor of Minneapolis from 2014 to 2018.

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“Love as the Practice of Freedom”

bell hooks

Social commentator, essayist, memoirist, and poet bell hooks (née Gloria Jean Watkins) is a feminist theorist who speaks on contemporary issues of race, gender, and media representation in America. Her many books include *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), *Talking Back* (1989), *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), *Outlaw Culture* (1994), and *Remembered Rapture* (1999). In *Black Looks* (1994), she writes, "It struck me that for black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identify." In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (1994), hooks advocates a "progressive cultural revolution" by means of repudiating all forms of domination in a "holistic manner." In order to decolonize our minds, suggests hooks, we must begin to "surrender participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination we enjoy individual and group privilege." In the essay that follows from that book, hooks proposes an "ethic of love" as the means by which we might be guided to turn away from an ethic of domination.

In this society, there is no powerful discourse on love emerging either from politically progressive radicals or from the Left. The absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.

Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. It has always puzzled me that women and men who spend a lifetime working to resist and oppose one form of domination can be systematically supporting another. I have been puzzled by powerful visionary black male leaders who can speak and act passionately in resistance to racial domination and accept and embrace sexist domination of women, by feminist white women who work daily to eradicate sexism but who have major blind spots when it comes to acknowledging and resisting racism and white supremacist domination of the planet. Critically examining these blind spots, I conclude that many of us are motivated to move against domination solely when we feel our self-interest directly threatened. Often, then, the longing is not for a collective transformation of society, an end to politics of dominations, but rather simply for an end to what we feel is hurting us. This is why we desperately need an ethic of love to intervene in our self-centered longing for change. Fundamentally, if we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination. Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle.

The ability to acknowledge blind spots can emerge only as we expand our concern about politics of domination and our capacity to care about the oppression and

exploitation of others. A love ethic makes this expansion possible. The civil rights movement transformed society in the United States because it was fundamentally rooted in a love ethic. No leader has emphasized this ethic more than Martin Luther King, jr. He had the prophetic insight to recognize that a revolution built on any other foundation would fail. Again and again, King testified that he had "decided to love" because he believed deeply that if we are "seeking the highest good" we "find it through love" because this is "the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality." And the point of being in touch with a transcendent reality is that we struggle for justice, all the while realizing that we are always more than our race, class, or sex. When I look back at the civil rights movement which was in many ways limited because it was a reformist effort, I see that it had the power to move masses of people to act in the interest of racial justice—and because it was profoundly rooted in a love ethic.

The sixties Black Power movement shifted away from that love ethic. The emphasis was now more on power. And it is not surprising that the sexism that had always undermined the black liberation struggle intensified, that a misogynist approach to women became central as the equation of freedom with patriarchal manhood became a norm among black political leaders, almost all of whom were male. Indeed, the new militancy of masculinist black power equated love with weakness, announcing that the quintessential expression of freedom would be the willingness to coerce, do violence, terrorize, indeed utilize the weapons of domination. This was the crudest embodiment of Malcolm X's bold credo "by any means necessary."

On the positive side, Black Power movement shifted the focus of black liberation struggle from reform to revolution. This was an important political development, bringing with it a stronger anti-imperialist, global perspective. However, masculinist sexist biases in leadership led to the suppression of the love ethic. Hence progress was made even as something valuable was lost. While King had focused on loving our enemies, Malcolm called us back to ourselves, acknowledging that taking care of blackness was our central responsibility. Even though King talked about the importance of black self-love, he talked more about loving our enemies. Ultimately, neither he nor Malcolm lived long enough to fully integrate the love ethic into a vision of political decolonization that would provide a blueprint for the eradication of black self-hatred.

Black folks entering the realm of racially integrated, American life because of the success of civil rights and black power movement suddenly found we were grappling with an intensification of internalized racism. The deaths of these important leaders (as well as liberal white leaders who were major allies in the struggle for racial equality) ushered in tremendous feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and despair. Wounded in that space where we would know love, black people collectively experienced intense pain and anguish about our future. The absence of public spaces where that pain could be articulated, expressed, shared meant that it was held in—festered, suppressing the possibility that this collective grief would be reconciled in community even as ways to move beyond it and continue resistance struggle would be envisioned. Feeling as though "the world had really come to an end," in the sense that a hope had died that racial justice would become the norm, a life-threatening despair took hold in black life. We will never know to what extent the black masculinist focus on hardness and toughness served as a barrier preventing sustained public acknowledgment of the enormous grief and pain in black life. In *World as Lover; World as Self*, Joanna Macy emphasizes in her chapter on "Despair Work" that

the refusal to feel takes a heavy toll. Not only is there an impoverishment of our emotional and sensory life . . . but this psychic numbing also impedes our capacity to process and

respond to information. The energy expended in pushing down despair is diverted from more creative uses, depleting the resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies.

If black folks are to move forward in our struggle for liberation, we must confront the legacy of this unreconciled grief, for it has been the breeding ground for profound nihilistic despair. We must collectively return to a radical political vision of social change rooted in a love ethic and seek once again to convert masses of people, black and nonblack.

A culture of domination is anti-love. It requires violence to sustain itself. To choose love is to go against the prevailing values of the culture. Many people feel unable to love either themselves or others because they do not know what love is. Contemporary songs like Tina Turner's "What's Love Got To Do With It" advocate a system of exchange around desire, mirroring the economics of capitalism: the idea that love is important is mocked. In his essay "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" Thomas Merton argues that we are taught within the framework of competitive consumer capitalism to see love as a business deal: "This concept of love assumes that the machinery of buying and selling of needs is what makes everything run. It regards life as a market and love as a variation on free enterprise." Though many folks recognize and critique the commercialization of love, they see no alternative. Not knowing how to love or even what love is, many people feel emotionally lost; others search for definitions, for ways to sustain a love ethic in a culture that negates human value and valorizes materialism.

The sales of books focusing on recovery, books that seek to teach folks ways to improve self-esteem, self-love, and our ability to be intimate in relationships, affirm that there is public awareness of a lack in most people's lives. M. Scott Peck's self-help book *The Road Less Traveled* is enormously popular because it addresses that lack.

Peck offers a working definition for love that is useful for those of us who would like to make a love ethic the core of all human interaction. He defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." Commenting on prevailing cultural attitudes about love, Peck writes:

Everyone in our culture desires to some extent to be loving, yet many are in fact not loving. I therefore conclude that the desire to love is not itself love. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.

His words echo Martin Luther King's declaration, "I have decided to love," which also emphasizes choice. King believed that love is "ultimately the only answer" to the problems facing this nation and the entire planet. I share that belief and the conviction that it is in choosing love, and beginning with love as the ethical foundation for politics, that we are best positioned to transform society in ways that enhance the collective good.

It is truly amazing that King had the courage to speak as much as he did about the transformative power of love in a culture where such talk is often seen as merely sentimental. In progressive political circles, to speak of love is to guarantee that one will be dismissed or considered naive. But outside those circles there are many people who openly acknowledge that they are consumed by feelings of self-hatred, who feel worthless, who want a way out. Often they are too trapped by paralyzing despair to be able to engage effectively in any movement for social change. However, if the leaders of

such movements refuse to address the anguish and pain of their lives, they will never be motivated to consider personal and political recovery. Any political movement that can effectively address these needs of the spirit in the context of liberation struggle will succeed.

In the past, most folks both learned about and tended the needs of the spirit in the context of religious experience. The institutionalization and commercialization of the church has undermined the power of religious community to transform souls, to intervene politically. Commenting on the collective sense of spiritual loss in modern society, Cornel West asserts:

There is a pervasive impoverishment of the spirit in American society, and especially among Black people. Historically, there have been cultural forces and traditions, like the church, that held cold-heartedness and mean-spiritedness at bay. However, today's impoverishment of the spirit means that this coldness and meanness is becoming more and more pervasive. The church kept these forces at bay by promoting a sense of respect for others, a sense of solidarity, a sense of meaning and value which would usher in the strength to battle against evil.

Life-sustaining political communities can provide a similar space for the renewal of the spirit. That can happen only if we address the needs of the spirit in progressive political theory and practice.

Often when Cornel West and I speak with large groups of black folks about the impoverishment of spirit in black life, the lovelessness, sharing that we can collectively recover ourselves in love, the response is overwhelming. Folks want to know how to begin the practice of loving. For me that is where education for critical consciousness has to enter. When I look at my life, searching it for a blueprint that aided me in the process of decolonization, of personal and political self-recovery, I know that it was learning the truth about how systems of domination operate that helped, learning to look both inward and outward with a critical eye. Awareness is central to the process of love as the practice of freedom. Whenever those of us who are members of exploited and oppressed groups dare to critically interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization. If we discover in ourselves self-hatred, low self-esteem, or internalized white supremacist thinking and we face it, we can begin to heal. Acknowledging the truth of our reality, both individual and collective, is a necessary stage for personal and political growth. This is usually the most painful stage in the process of learning to love—the one many of us seek to avoid. Again, once we choose love, we instinctively possess the inner resources to confront that pain. Moving through the pain to the other side we find the joy, the freedom of spirit that a love ethic brings.

Choosing love we also choose to live in community, and that means that we do not have to change by ourselves. We can count on critical affirmation and dialogue with comrades walking a similar path. African American theologian Howard Thurman believed that we best learn love as the practice of freedom in the context of community. Commenting on this aspect of his work in the essay "Spirituality out on The Deep," Luther Smith reminds us that Thurman felt the United States was given to diverse groups of people by the universal life force as a location for the building of community. Paraphrasing Thurman, he writes: "Truth becomes true in community. The social order hungers for a center (i.e. spirit, soul) that gives it identity, power, and purpose. America, and all cultural entities, are in search of a soul." Working within community,

whether it be sharing a project with another person, or with a larger group, we are able to experience joy in struggle. That joy needs to be documented. For if we only focus on the pain, the difficulties which are surely real in any process of transformation, we only show a partial picture.

A love ethic emphasizes the importance of service to others. Within the value system of the United States any task or job that is related to "service" is devalued. Service strengthens our capacity to know compassion and deepens our insight. To serve another I cannot see them as an object, I must see their subjecthood. Sharing the teaching of Shambala warriors, Buddhist Joanna Macy writes that we need weapons of compassion and insight.

You have to have compassion because it gives you the juice, the power, the passion to move. When you open to the pain of the world you move, you act. But that weapon is not enough. It can burn you out, so you need the other—you need insight into the radical interdependence of all phenomena. With that wisdom you know that it is not a battle between good guys and bad guys, but that the line between good and evil runs through the landscape of every human heart. With insight into our profound interrelatedness, you know that actions undertaken with pure intent have repercussions throughout the web of life, beyond what you can measure or discern.

Macy shares that compassion and insight can "sustain us as agents of wholesome change" for they are "gifts for us to claim now in the healing of our world." In part, we learn to love by giving service. This is again a dimension of what Peck means when he speaks of extending ourselves for another.

The civil rights movement had the power to transform society because the individuals who struggle alone and in community for freedom and justice wanted these gifts to be for all, not just the suffering and the oppressed. Visionary black leaders such as Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Howard Thurman warned against isolationism. They encouraged black people to look beyond our own circumstances and assume responsibility for the planet. This call for communion with a world beyond the self, the tribe, the race, the nation, was a constant invitation for personal expansion and growth. When masses of black folks starting thinking solely in terms of "us and them," internalizing the value system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, blind spots developed, the capacity for empathy needed for the building of community was diminished. To heal our wounded body politic we must reaffirm our commitment to a vision of what King referred to in the essay "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" as a genuine commitment to "freedom and justice for all." My heart is uplifted when I read King's essay; I am reminded where true liberation leads us. It leads us beyond resistance to transformation. King tells us that "the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community." The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom.

Working with the Text

1. Why does progressive politics "desperately need an ethic of love," according to bell hooks? How does she explain its disappearance from contemporary political discourse? Why is it particularly important in the struggle for racial justice?

2. What is "love"? Where does the essay find a working definition of this famously elusive term? What sort of politics derives ideas from the literature of self-help? In other words, does the essay make claims—overt or implied—about where political theory should look for inspiration? What other nonpolitical disciplines furnish ideas to "Love as the Practice of Freedom"?
3. Why does the essay stress love as a "practice"? Consult a good dictionary (the Oxford English Dictionary, if you can) to see which meanings of the word "practice" may be relevant; then consider the relationships among the various definitions. According to bell hooks, what does the practice of love require people to do? And what does it do for them, both collectively and individually?
4. The essay features a number of exemplary characters, from Martin Luther King, who illustrates the vast political efficacy of love, to Tina Turner, whose 1984 hit "What's Love Got To Do With It" expresses a contrasting cynicism. Why do you suppose the author introduces these figures? What do they have in common, and where do they differ? Given the essay's topic and approach, did any of them surprise you?
5. Identify another ideal not normally associated with politics—possibly one from a completely different value system. You may wish to brainstorm with classmates or look up lists of unusual virtues, such as those embraced by crusaders or geisha. In a timed writing exercise (20 to 30 minutes), consider the possible benefits of your irregular ideal to the specific branch of politics that you know best. The branch need not be national; it can be extremely local—the politics of your college sorority, for example. Write for the allotted time without stopping to reflect or reread.

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