

RESILIENCE:

how we recover and transform

Resilience: The ability to become strong, healthy or successful again after something bad happens. the ability of something to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, bent, etc. an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.⁷⁰

“**Resilience:** (v) The way the water knows just how to flow, not force itself around a river rock; then surely I can stretch myself in the shape my own path is asking of me.”

—Corina Fadel

grounding in nature

“Everything, given time and nurturing, is moving toward balance and healing. The mushrooms that cleaned the land after nuclear trauma...the process of forest growth after a fire...the way our skin heals after a cut...stronger than before. Healing is organic, healing is our birthright.”

—Lisa Thomas Adeyemo

“Nature regenerates. It works in unison in its creation & destruction. Nature is a collective entity. It lives on no matter what, in oceans, forests, volcanoes and shifting tectonic plates, in the sighs of tigers and the hum of birds wings. Nature heals itself.”

—sham-e-ali nayeem

“From Starfish I have learned that if we keep our core intact, we can regenerate. We can fall apart, lose limbs, and re-grow them as long as we don't let anyone threaten that central disc's integrity. We can grow so many different arms, depending on what kind of sea star we are. We have to nourish ourselves with the resources we are surrounded by, with our community assets if you will, and by doing so we help keep ecosystems delicately balanced.”

—JoLillian T. Zwerdling

“Nature is in the pesticides that are in the flesh of whales in the deepest parts of the arctic ocean, because what humans create is not exceptional, it is not outside of nature.⁷¹ The vastness of the cosmos is a nuclear reactor that creates all the elements that make us up and makes up our minds and all that we create, from poetry to weapons, sweatshops and digital networks made in them that connect people. Nature is everything.”

—micha cárdenas

“We are part of this universe; we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts, is that the universe is in us.”

—Neil Degrasse Tyson

“Nature reminds me that healing is natural. My body, spirit, and mind want to heal and I need to create the space and time to do that.”

—Andrea Quijada

Mushrooms detox the soil around them, not just removing the toxins, but transforming toxic content into nourishment.

After many dives I now think of “coral reef” as a verb, or a process, a way that ocean life creates home and beauty out of ships, cars, bikes, and other things never meant to live on the ocean floor.

The very cycle of food and nourishment in nature, the food chain, which works because most things on earth can be food at some point in their lives or deaths. All of the creatures I grew up disgusted by—roaches, mosquitos, rats, vultures, squirrels (in a trashcan there is no difference between a rat and a squirrel)—have slowly gained my respect because of the breadth of ways they nourish themselves, their adaptive survival brilliance.

“When I was young I was taught to fear big forces of nature—tornadoes, thunderstorms, snowstorms, hurricanes. Taught they cause destruction and devastation. Taught to hide under desks, in basements, stay close to home. For me, somatic work has been about relearning and reconnecting to the wisdom and life in natural forces. That what is most alive leads to opening, creating, change. That in the destruction of something lies a whole new world of

possibility—a place where patterns can finally become unhinged and there's space for something new to take its place. Not that this doesn't come without loss, grief, devastation, it often does. But to see that there's also resilience, the beauty of survival, the move to create and thrive despite what surrounds us. To me that's the essence of our fights for liberation.”
—Spenta Kandawalla

Humans, especially humans who persist in trying to transform the conditions of life, are remarkably resilient. We experience so much loss, pain, hardship, attack—and we persist! Resilience is in our nature, and we recover from things that we would be justified in giving up over, again and again.

Resilience is unveiled when we are triggered, injured, heartbroken, attacked, challenged. I am curious about our general resilience as social justice actors in a traumatizing world, and as collectives of people shaping the next phase of human evolution. One core practice of resilience is transformative justice, transforming the conditions that make injustice possible. Resilience is perhaps our most beautiful, miraculous trait.

i am not afraid
of what i came here to do
i'm made of stardust
we are not afraid
of what we're called now to do
we're all made of god

Human Nature in Futbol

I am not generally a futbol (or any other kind of sports) watcher. Sports are so oriented around competitive and capitalist indulgence, uplifting heroes and gathering faceless erasable masses to cheer them on.

But I am beginning to suspect that nothing operates outside the realm of emergent strategy.

I was in Amsterdam during the World Cup. It was part of being immersed in this place, sitting at coffeeshops with my lover and watching the competition with an international spread of locals.

I didn't have a particular team I was rooting for, and really only engaged around the quarter finals, but once I got hooked I couldn't stop watching. And rather than rooting for particular teams or players, I was fascinated by the patterns and rhythms, the art of the game—it looked like movements. So I want to offer some analysis from my non-expert vantage point.

I was watching the semi-final match when Germany scored seven points on Brazil, most of those points within an eighteen-minute free for all in the first half. It was brutal to see.

I had the humbling opportunity, during my dad's last assignment in Germany, to be a fairly useless part of my high school soccer team. We were invited to play a friendly international match against a team of German third graders. They scored like thirty goals on us while barely seeming to move or break a sweat. Over and over they took the ball away while we ran in circles, gasped for air and tried not to cry.

I didn't understand why Brazil looked like my high school team. In the semi-finals of the World Cup! I needed it explained to me. I was reaching out to people, because the commentary was in Dutch and I needed to know where the gorgeous warrior dancing magicians I'd witnessed in the quarter-final against Colombia had disappeared to.

My sister Autumn reminded me that, in that very breathtaking match, Neymar was injured, and Silva was carded. She broke down how much Neymar and Silva were the center-captain-irreplaceable aspects of offense and defense, respectively.

Watching the end of the World Cup, it occurred to me —first as I found myself hoping for a mercy ruling in the Brazil–Germany match, and then again while watching Germany seem to easily work together to defend and score on Argentina in the final—that this was a perfect example of emergent strategy in action.

Emergent strategy includes being intentional, which, at a basic level, I think all of the teams were. They each intended to win number one, period. But it also includes being intentional even in a fractal sense, at the smallest level. Watching the way Germany had one to two people in pursuit of the ball even when the opposing goalie was trying to figure out where to kick it, there was a hungry focus on possession of the ball that presenced their intention to win in even the smallest moments.

Emergent strategy includes being decentralized. Brazil's team was oriented around key stars who embody certain skill sets. When those players are in and on, it is the most beautiful playing I have ever seen. For Germany's team, even after watching them play several games, I couldn't point out anyone irreplaceable on their team, any superstars or best players.

Based on my limited viewing, they seemed to easily interchange players and fluidly move together to defend their goal—not as dazzling, but consistent, effective, beautiful in its collectivity.

Emergent strategy is adaptive and interdependent. When Neymar and Silva were taken out, Brazil didn't have the capacity or depth on their team to adapt. The lack of cohesion from their team felt loud. Germany moved like a flock of birds over and around the field. They worked as one body to take possession of the ball and move it. Any time Brazil or Argentina got the ball, Germany suddenly had four players around them. It didn't feel like a formation, it felt like interdependent murmuration towards a shared intention—they flew towards the ball. The sheer number of team members attending to the ball at any given point meant that Germany was consistently creating more possibilities for itself to have the ball, to have choice over what happened next, to get the chance to score.

“For me it sometimes doesn't feel so easy to pause, center, and listen to nature's messages. Let's be frank—organizing can be chaotic and exhausting. But nature has taught me that while chaos exists we can always have balance. I am learning to listen to those resiliency messages from nature, in the same ways that I have learned deep authentic listening as a part of how I organize. When the balance is off or chaos enters, elements of the ecosystem fail, life is harmed, relationships are damaged, sacrifices are made, new ways of being emerge. Nature makes shifts to resist, rebuild, restore, and create. It strives towards balance, wholeness by being in togetherness and harmony with each other.”
—Beatriz Beckford

How We Learn From Pain

“If we are going to heal, let it be glorious.”
—Beyoncé

“You don't need to use force to defend yourself—safety can come in hiding in yourself like a turtle, or hiding by being yourself in the right place, like a praying mantis, invisible on a green branch (or a toad fish on the sea floor), or by doing something unexpected like an armadillo (they can jump three feet straight up in the air to startle predators, and then they run away!).”
—Kat Aaron

“*Dii Nvwati* (Cherokee). Translation: Skunk medicine. The skunk asks us to defend ourselves effectively, without causing further conflict. Self-protection but do no harm. Gangsterish peace-making. That is the kind of masculinity that I try to embody. With my leadership, with my poise, with my privileges. As my body continues on a journey of thickening, muscle hardening, limbs lengthening, Ayurvedic drying, shorter synapse pathways, fuzzier intuition, and choppy verbal articulation all facilitated by weekly testosterone injections these are poignant lessons to forward. The objective is for men and masculine people to not yield our power to others... Women and femme people don't need our paternalistic sickle to swath as we 'tap out.' We must figure out power without domination.

“Just as our body mass of people of color in the United States continues to grow and we inch near the time of outnumbering the current White majority in population numbers it will be imperative that we use our people power strategically. Numbers alone won't ensure justice and liberation. The skunk asks us to use our powers effectively, without wiping ourselves out. Without recapitulating top down, give-less-to-get-more social structures. Just as the skunk does not seek to be the bear, let us not attempt to trade places with the oppressor. Let us navigate a road of paradigm shifting that seeks to salve both current social and economic injuries, but also prepare a sustainable method of being for seven generations to come.”
—Holiday Simmons

“And then there is the butterfly, a most magical creature. The wings of the butterfly are already held inside the caterpillar, and as it breaks down its old self into goo the wings emerge ready to go. That process is amazing and teaches me that as we change and transform, we also have everything we need already right inside of us. So my organizing and healing work becomes about building the cocoon that can hold the goo so that the wings can emerge.”
—Micah Hobbes Frazier

Nothing in nature is disposable. Part of the resilience of nature is that nothing in nature is wasted. The earth swallows it all through mouths or soil or water. This is such a simple beautiful truth. Everything is food, fuel, compost, a home for some other creature.

There are predator and prey dynamics in nature, there are battles over territory. There are systems and power dynamics. There is a focus on mating and the rearing of offspring. There are reasonable and unreasonable behaviors. There are toxic materials, there are volcanic explosions and avalanches and so much destruction. And yet nothing is disposable, the cycle of life ultimately makes use of everything.

“I’ve found that our immediate environments are mirrors for the spiritual turmoil inside of us that we inherited from our forebears. By reclaiming our relationship with the Earth, we can then start healing ourselves and our communities from the inside out and from the ground up.”

—Shane Bernardo

Humans have made of ourselves a hierarchy of value in which some people are disposable—can fail at being human, can be killed as a punishment, can be collateral damage. Can be wasted. Or tortured. Or locked in a small box for their whole lives, given no hope of transformation, or a future in society.

And even those of us who critique these punitive methods, who are committed to justice, practice our own versions of prisons, blacklists, takedowns, and public executions. When we don’t agree with each other, we destroy each other. When we feel competitive with each other, we splinter and...destroy the other. We say we don’t care, and then invest time and energy into cultivating conflict with each other. When we feel scared, we destroy each other instead of working to get to the root of our fear.

How do we shift into a culture in which conflict and difference is generative?

One place to turn to with a transformative justice lens is our shared vision. When we imagine the world we want to shift towards, are we dreaming of being the winners of the future? Or are we dreaming of a world where winning is no longer necessary because there are no enemies?

Domination or peace? I argue that peace is the most strategic option for our long-term survival. Not an uninformed or compromising peace—a peace that is built on truth, accountability, and equity.

I will admit here that even some of my closest loved ones find me naive for holding a vision of a humanity with no enemies. I *can* imagine it though, and in fact, it seems like the only viable long-term solution. We need to transform all of the energy we currently put into war and punishment into creating solutions for how to continue on this planet. The time, the energy, the money—we actually have all of that in abundance. What we lack is will.

What we put our attention on grows.

We have been growing otherness, borders, separateness. And in all that division we have created layer upon layer of trauma and vengefulness, conditions for permanent war, practices that move us into a battle with the very planet we rely on for all life. The scale of division, conflict, racism, xenophobia, and hierarchical supremacy on our planet is overwhelming.

Finding the places of healing and transformation, moving towards a world beyond enemies, is work that has to be done for our survival. Which means transformative justice—justice that transforms the root causes of injustice—is necessary at every scale, but I am particularly focused on how it becomes the common orientation and practice of movements for social change, for peace, for liberation.

I tie transformative justice into emergent strategy because it feels like a non-negotiable aspect of our future, and because the natural world has guidance for us here.

Transformative justice, in the context of emergent strategy, asks us to consider how to transform toxic energy, hurt, legitimate pain, and conflict into solutions. To get under the wrong, find a way to coexist, be energy moving towards life, together.

While we often put our attention on the state and demand transformative and restorative justice, it is important that individuals begin practicing in our personal, familial, and communal lives—we can reach the people we need to reach, and measure our work by the way the relationships feel. It is hard work, but it is accessible to anyone, anywhere, at any scale.

Eventually, transformative practices that begin small will demand new societal structures. I suspect we can’t back into this, demanding that our government provide a form of justice that even we in our movements do not know how to practice in real time. So let’s grow our expertise in this.

Before I go any further in this section, I want to share with y’all some wisdom from the incomparable Shira Hassan.

Shira and I can never quite remember when and how we met, but it was when we were both doing harm reduction work—reducing the harm from drug use and sex while increasing the agency of each human being to make decisions related to his/her/their body without shame or judgment.

And we were thrilled to find each other.

Over the years, she has been a confidante, tarot reader, guide, friend—she has taught me how to be less judgmental, to love my fatness, to embrace my own needs as my body has gone through various levels of ability and disability, and, through her work at Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP) and her consulting, she has taught me a ton about transformative justice. I showed Shira an early draft of this book and her feedback was so good that I had to include it here as a core part of this chapter. Here is some Shira brilliance:

I love that you are writing about transformative justice in the context of emergent strategy. I need us to acknowledge more that we have no idea what we are doing—that we are birthing a new collective consciousness out of the pain of losing too many people to colonialist justice. I need transformative justice (TJ) to be framed as a part of emergent strategy so that we can acknowledge we are midwives to a changeling—that TJ is mutable process with only its values set in stone. In order to resist one size fits all justice, we have to resist the idea that every process looks the same. The goal is for us to embody these values so that our creativity can guide our healing and our drive for treating each other with true justice. With every experience of healing on our own terms, we also begin to heal the generational wounds of colonialist justice.

Here is the definition I use in my trainings and that YWEP used too:

Transformative Justice:

1. Acknowledges the reality of state harm.
2. Looks for alternative ways to address/interrupt harm, which do not rely on the state.
3. Relies on organic, creative strategies that are community created and sustained.
4. Transforms the root causes of violence, not only the individual experience.

I love the piece you wrote that is included later in this section (“We Are Still Beginning”)—it’s one of my favorites on TJ right now and I’ve been using it in my workshops.

“Nothing in nature is disposable”—this isn’t most people’s belief—I just killed a bug earlier today and will set out some rat poison tomorrow... lol—but for real... also the struggle between disposability and getting something/someone that doesn’t work for me out of my life.

No one is disposable and yet—we have a right to make boundaries. Furthermore, we want people to make boundaries.

For people who are currently in abusive situations and living with their violent partners, this kind of TJ thinking needs more clarity. I can’t tell you how many times I have had to go back to the drawing board because someone I love has used TJ principles of transformation and non-shaming to justify the return of their abusive jerk partner. I say all this to say I think its important to think of the audience as people who are currently in abusive situations—what are we telling them? What are we asking?

I really like Generation 5’s work on this—I use this a lot—it is a combination of gen5’s principles with YWEP’s thinking combined into it:

Safety, Healing, and Agency For All

1. Safety, Healing, and Individual Agency for Survivors.
2. Accountability and a transformation for people who harm.
3. Community action, healing, and/or group/org accountability.
4. Transformation of the social conditions that perpetuate violence.

Lessons From a Transformative Breakup: How to Find New Ways to Be In Each Other’s Lives and Not Split the Communities We Love or the Movements We Support

Try every single thing you can to make it work, and articulate the effort you are making to each other. Even things you aren’t sure will work—try EVERYthing. This will matter later.

Love yourself.

Don’t let fear make you settle for something you know isn’t working.

Be honest. The harder things are to say, the more necessary they are to say.

Commit to being in each other’s lives, and doing whatever is needed to ensure that in the long term.

...This may include being far away from each other (physically, and in social media, and in all communications) in the short term.

Set boundaries around communication and stick to them. This includes how often to communicate, what is ok to talk about, who it’s ok to talk to about the process, and permission to express feelings. You can identify a new boundary as you go along if something hurts or doesn’t feel right.

Don’t tell anyone else until you are ready.

Be intentional about who you tell, what you say, and letting people know what is and isn’t ok to talk or ask about. Write

a letter to your community if need be. That way your true story trumps gossip and bullshit.

Feel your feelings.

Feel your feelings!

Feel your feelings.

Gather trusted support around you and lean on them as much as necessary.

Together, tell the story of your relationship to a trusted and neutral friend. What happened, what was great, what did you learn? Be as honest as possible, and take the time to tell the whole thing.

Don't judge each other's choices, feelings, or processes. You can't actually know what is going on for the other person. Take responsibility for your own feelings and act accordingly.

When you feel ready, dream together about the new relationship you want to have with each other.

As you come into new, post-breakup relationship with each other, watch for your patterns and take it slow.

Celebrate your maturity and growth and ability to be present and do this.

Invite others to celebrate and applaud the efforts.

When you feel ready, enjoy the friendship you made possible together.

Please note: All of this is in the case of a generally awesome, healthy relationship that doesn't quite work—not an abusive one that you may need to actually completely leave quickly.

Transformative Justice In An Abusive Dynamic

“Like everything in nature, we all have gifts. Sometimes the gifts don't seem like gifts, the bee that stings, the stinging nettle that irritates your skin. But when we look at our ecosystem in totality it is clear how each piece is necessary for the whole. It's a reminder to make room for all of us, in all our fiery, stinging glory.”
—Karissa Lewis

“Every living thing has a role in the ecosystem and its own destiny to fulfill—even things we can't see, don't like, or don't understand.”
—Judy Hatcher

When an abusive dynamic builds between lovers, family, partners, or coworkers, it is first and foremost important to understand that it is a dynamic that both/all parties are playing into, consciously and unconsciously. This is different from an abusive event—one explosive moment. This is when there is habitual emotional, spiritual, and/or physical violence and cruelty.

An abusive dynamic is sustained by the two or more people directly involved in it, and a bevy of others who ignore, enable, or exacerbate it.

When we are children or dependents, we don't usually have full agency to shift or leave an abusive dynamic because our safety and livelihood depend upon our abuser, and many of us figure out other ways of “leaving”—dissociation, appeasing, addiction, etc.

When we are adults, we can begin to notice how we are playing into the dynamic, and to shift. We have agency, even if we feel like we are solely victims. That realization can be liberation itself.

Often the same dynamics echo across different realms of our lives—what we allow in our home and love realm shows up with our friends, or with our families, or with our coworkers, bosses, or partner organizations. It is our pattern, our shape.

These patterns are prevalent within our movements, spilling the boundaries of our personal lives and creating toxicity in our organizations and networks. We perpetuate abusive dynamics under the guise of accountability, call-outs—even solidarity and love.

If you have the ability to see the dynamic, to see yourself in a pattern, and walk away before reaching the point of emotional or physical harm... Bravo!

And if not, hey—most of us don't. We need community to hold us in our dignity and to support transformative justice. Here are a few signs that you may be in an abusive movement, work, family, friendship, or romantic dynamic:

- you make agreements or set boundaries and they get crossed or broken, *and/or* you can't hold the agreements/boundaries yourself.
- you can't communicate directly with the person/people about issues or concerns (culture of gossip usually grows here, in the family, office, group).
- when you raise the issue that agreements or boundaries are not being held, there is no accountability (the other

person or people deny the transgression, say they forgot the agreements, say it is your fault, ridicule you, continue the transgression—and/or you can't see your accountability in boundary crossing, and/or diminish the harm).

- there is a culture of blaming or dishonesty that breaks down trust over time.
- you don't feel comfortable processing the issues of the dynamic with friends, coworkers, allies (you feel ashamed, or like it will upset the other person/people in the dynamic).
- arguments are really confusing and/or repetitive—you can't tell what you are arguing about, the arguments have no boundaries or containers, you keep returning to issues you felt were resolved, or you keep losing track of your own values and center in the process.
- you feel dismissed, hidden, or disrespected, *and/or* like you can't acknowledge reality, be transparent, or respectful.
- you feel like a core part of yourself is compromised or not welcome, *and/or* you want to change a core aspect of another person or group.
- you feel bullied or bullying, scared or scary, emotionally unsafe.
- you feel like something is being taken from you, *and/or* that you are taking from the other person.

Once you become aware of the dynamic, it is important to take some space to get clear in yourself. So often these dynamics perpetuate because we are scared to be alone, scared to create conflict, scared to take a step back. And then once we do, we get more air, more clarity.

If it feels like there is work that can be done for mediation, healing, and transformation, by all means put time and attention there, but with some humility—the nature of abusive dynamics is that they are foggy and hard to navigate from within. Often we leap to couples therapy or office mediation while still in the private fog of it all. Get transparent and current with trusted friends or comrades who can offer perspective on the situation.

You have the right to tell your story. The silence and shame around these dynamics makes people think they are alone and especially flawed. Not so. Organizations are rife with abusive bosses or collective members, social justice movements are full of couples in private battles against the oppressive dynamics we face in the world. You are not alone, and you do not have to be silent.

You do not have the right to traumatize abusive people, to attack them personally or publicly, or to sabotage anyone else's health. The behaviors of abuse are also survival-based, learned behaviors rooted in some pain. If you can look through the lens of compassion, you will find hurt and trauma there. If you are the abused party, healing that hurt is not your responsibility and exacerbating that pain is not your justified right.

You do have the right to walk away, to literally and virtually gather yourself up and remove yourself from the dynamic. Take space in order to remember and fortify yourself.

You have the right to create boundaries that generate more possibilities for you. Those boundaries may be short term or permanent.

You have the right to ask for support from your friends/community. It really helps to find neutral mediators, or mediation teams, to support conversations that the abusive dynamics may make difficult. Sometimes the feeling of things being unresolved will keep pulling you back into the conversation—mediation can help draw the line.

You are not obligated to engage in a process with someone if you do not feel like it—whether you feel unsafe or exhausted or angry. While we are working towards a world where all conflict can be resolved in a transformative way, we aren't there yet, and a lot of messy shit goes down in the name of transformative justice. One thing to really track here if you are the abuser, or in a mutually abusive dynamic, and you don't want to participate in a process—this could be you dodging responsibility that, if you did take it on, could transform your life and future relationships. But it's up to you.

You have the right to not know the right moves to make.

"I remember as a small child seeing the geese flying south. Firefly season. A cicada that lived for a while in the cracks of the cement bricks that made up our porch wall. A flash flood sweeping cars away while we were huddled under an overhang on a picnic. Lightning felling a tree in our backyard. I guess I learned that everything will pass.
"But also, and equally true, it will all come back again."
—Karen Joy Fowler

Liberated Relationships

One of the fastest ways to learn interdependence is to shift how we show up in relationship. Primarily, to get more honest in our relationships. I am not saying you especially are a liar—I am saying we are a culture of liars. We learn to lie, either with overt mistruths or egregious omissions, at a very intimate level, not to ask for what we need, not to say aloud

what we want, not to be honest when things hurt or bother us.

Here are some reasons we swallow our truths:

- Capitalism: we are taught that love is about belonging to one person or community, and we must contort in order to ensure continued belonging. We are taught that our value is in what we can produce, and emotions impede production.
- The oppression of supremacy: we are taught that, if we are not white, male, straight, able, wealthy, adult, etc., our truths don't matter. This starts very early, we are taught that our feelings and thoughts as children are unimportant, that we are to "be seen and not heard."
- The oppression of false peace: we are taught that our truths are disruptive, and that disruption is a negative act. This one is particularly insidious, and ties back into capitalism—only those moving towards profit can and should create disruption, everyone else should be complacent consumers.

For these reasons and others, we stay in the realm of repressed emotions and passive or outright aggression, and we end up in personal and professional relationships that don't serve us. Because we are fractal creatures, these patterns repeat in every part of our lives. To close the gap between what we actually want and need and what we communicate to others, we have to be in the practice of authenticity in relationship, or what I am calling Liberated Relationship. Here are some of the principles in development for Liberated Relationships:

- Radical honesty. No omissions, no white lies, no projections. Ask the questions you really want answered, speak your truth, and let the relationship build inside all that reality. Just a note from experience, the small lies can be the hardest to stop telling. "No I don't want to get on the phone right now, can we just text?"; "I'm busy catching up on my reality TV show"; "Real cow milk ice cream"; or "I know I said I didn't want to ____, but now I do." However, the more you practice this, the more you will find yourself spending your waking hours in the ways you want to, the ways that honor the miracle of your existence, which was not given to you to waste in polite avoidance of hurting people's feelings. You will find that you can be honest and kind, you can be honest and compassionate.
- Acknowledge the dynamics, then keep growing. Have an understanding on the front end of the race, class, gender, ability, geographic, and other power dynamics that exist between you. And also remember that these are constructs. Be in the complexity of living inside these constructs while evolving beyond them through relationship.
- Relinquish Frankenstein. You are not creating people to be with, or work with, some idealized individuals made of perfect parts of personality that you discovered on your life journey. You are meeting individuals with their own full lives behind and ahead of them. Stop trying to make and fix others, and instead be curious about what they have made of themselves.

Ok do you want to try Liberated Relationships? I suggest starting with one and building from there. Pick one person who is in your life right now, someone you want a more authentic relationship with, and tell them exactly that. Ask if you can practice radical honesty together. It is difficult at first, but the results are unparalleled freedom and satisfaction.

As you grow this skill, bring it to work, to family, to love. I have found that I now spend immensely less time managing the truth for others, and have people around me who want and encourage the real me to show up. In the practices section check out "Coevolution Through Friendship and Woes."

We Are Still Beginning⁷²

I've been thinking a lot about transformative justice lately.

In the past few months I've been to a couple of gatherings I was really excited about, and then found myself disappointed, not because drama kicked up, which is inevitable, but because of how we as participants and organizers and people handled those dramas.

Simultaneously I've watched several public takedowns, call-outs, and other grievances take place on social and mainstream media. Some of those have been of strangers, but recently I've had the experience of seeing people I know and love targeted and taken down. In most cases, very complex realities get watered down into one flawed aspect of these people's personalities, or one mistake or misunderstanding. A mob mentality takes over then, an evisceration of character that is punitive, traumatizing, and isolating.

This has happened with increasing frequency over the past year, such that I'm wondering if those of us with an

intention of transforming the world have a common understanding of the kind of justice we want to practice, now and in the future.

What we do now is find out someone or some group has done (or may have done) something out of alignment with our values. Some of the transgressions are small—saying something fucked-up, being disrespectful in a group process. Some are massive—false identity, sexual assault.

We then tear that person or group to shreds in a way that affirms our values. We create memes, reducing someone to the laughingstock of the Internet that day. We write think-pieces on how we are not like that person, and obviously wouldn't make the same mistakes they have made. We deconstruct them as thinkers, activists, groups, bodies, partners, parents, children—finding all of the contradictions and limitations and shining bright light on them. When we are satisfied that that person or group is destroyed, we move on. Or sometimes we just move on because the next scandal has arrived, the smell of fresh meat overwhelming our interest in finishing the takedown.

I say “we” and “our” intentionally here. I'm not above this behavior. I laugh at the memes, I like the apoplectic statuses, the rants with no named target that very clearly critique a specific person. I've been examining this—why I can get caught up in a mob on the Internet in a way I rarely do in life (the positive mob mentality I participate in for, say, Beyoncé or Björk feels quite different, though I know there is something in there about belonging...eh, next book). I have noticed that at the most basic level, I feel better about myself because I'm on the right side of history...or at least the news cycle.

But lately, as the attacks grow faster and more vicious, I wonder: is this what we're here for? To cultivate a fear-based adherence to reductive common values? What can this lead to in an imperfect world full of sloppy, complex humans? Is it possible we will call each other out until there's no one left beside us?

I've had tons of conversations with people who, in these moments of public flaying, avoid stepping up on the side of complexity or curiosity because in the back of our minds is the shared unspoken question: when will y'all come for me?

I have also had experiences where I absolutely wanted to take someone down, expose them as a liar, cheater, manipulator, assailant. In each of these situations, time, conversation, and vulnerability have created other possibilities, and I have ended up glad that I didn't go that route, which is generally so short-term in its impact. Sometimes this was because transformation was possible between us. Sometimes this was because the takedown wouldn't have had the impact I wanted; destroying a person doesn't destroy all of the systems that allow harmful people to do harm. These takedowns make it seem as if massive problems are determined at an individual level, as if these individuals set a course as children to become abusers, misogynists, racists, liars.

How do I hold a systemic analysis and approach when each system I am critical of is peopled, in part, by the same flawed and complex individuals that I love? This question always leads me to self-reflection. If I can see the ways I am perpetuating systemic oppressions, if I can see where I learned the behavior and how hard it is to unlearn it, I start to have more humility as I see the messiness of the communities I am part of, the world I live in.

The places I'm drawn to in movement espouse a desire for transformative justice—justice practices that go all the way to the root of the problem and generate solutions and healing there, such that the conditions that create injustice are transformed.

A lot of people use these words, and yet...we don't really know how to do it.

We call it “transformative justice” when we're throwing knives and insults, exposing each other's worst mistakes, reducing each other to moments of failure. We call it “holding each other accountable.”

I recently reposted these words from Ryan Li Dahlstrom, speaking about this trend in the queer community:

I'm feeling really tired of the call out culture on social media especially within queer/trans people of color communities. We need to center and build relationships with one another and not keep tearing one another down publicly without trying to have direct conversations. While there are many places of learning, growth, and contradictory practice within the world we live in, why can't we talk to one another directly and allow room for learning from our mistakes or differences? By making these public attacks on each other, we are engaging in the same disposability politics of capitalism and the prison industrial complex that we purport to be against while feeding into state surveillance tactics that are monitoring how we are tearing each other down. Enough is enough y'all. We need each other now more than ever.⁷³

Yes, Ryan Li, I too am tired of it. But I see it everywhere I turn.

When the response to mistakes, failures, and misunderstandings is emotional, psychological, economic, and physical punishment, we breed a culture of fear, secrecy, and isolation.

So I'm wondering, in a real way: How can we pivot toward practicing transformative justice? How do we shift from individual, interpersonal, and inter-organizational anger toward viable, generative, sustainable systemic change?

In my facilitation and mediation work, I've seen three questions that can help us grow. I offer them here in context with

a real longing to hear more responses, to get in deep practice that helps us create conditions conducive to life in our movements and communities.

1. Why? Listen with “Why?” as a framework.

People mess up. We lie, exaggerate, betray, hurt, and abandon each other. When we hear that something bad has happened, it makes sense to feel anger, pain, confusion, and sadness. But to move immediately to punishment means that we stay on the surface of what has happened.

To transform the conditions of the “wrongdoing,” we have to ask ourselves and each other “Why?” Even—especially—when we are scared of the answer.

It’s easy to decide a person or group is shady, evil, psychopathic. The hard truth (hard because there’s no quick fix) is that long-term injustice creates most evil behavior. The percentage of psychopaths in the world is just not high enough to justify the ease with which we attempt to label that condition to others.

In my mediations, “Why?” is often the game-changing, possibility-opening question. That’s because the answers rehumanize those we feel are perpetrating against us. “Why?” often leads us to grief, abuse, trauma, often undiagnosed mental illnesses like depression or bipolar disorder, difference, socialization, childhood, scarcity, loneliness. Also, “Why?” makes it impossible to ignore that we might be capable of a similar transgression in similar circumstances. We don’t want to see that.

Demonizing is more efficient than relinquishing our world views, which is why we have slavery, holocausts, lynchings, and witch trials in our short human history.

“Why?” can be an evolutionary question.

2. Ask yourself/selves: What can I/we learn from this?

I love the pop star Rihanna, not just because she smokes blunts in ball gowns, but because one of her earliest tattoos says, “Never a failure, always a lesson.”

If the only thing I can learn from a situation is that some humans do bad things, it’s a waste of my precious time—I already know that.

What I want to know is: What can this teach me/us about how to improve our humanity?

What can we learn? In every situation there are lessons that lead to transformation.

3. How can my real-time actions contribute to transforming this situation (versus making it worse)?

This question feels particularly important in the age of social media, where we can make our pain viral before we’ve even had a chance to feel it. Often we are well down a path of public shaming and punishment before we have any facts about what’s happening. That’s true of mainstream takedowns, and it’s true of interpersonal grievances.

We air our dirt not to each other, but with each other, with hashtags or in specific but nameless rants, to the public, and to those who feed on our weakness and divisions.

We make it less likely to find room for mediation and transformation.

We make less of ourselves.

Again, there are times when that kind of calling out is the only option—particularly in relation to those of great privilege who are not within our reach.

But if you have each other’s phone numbers, or are within two degrees of social-media connection, and particularly if you are in the small, small percentage of humans trying to change the world—you actually have access to transformative justice in real time. Get mediation support, think of the community, move toward justice.

Real time is slower than social-media time, where everything feels urgent. Real time often includes periods of silence, reflection, growth, space, self-forgiveness, processing with loved ones, rest, and responsibility.

Real-time transformation requires stating your needs and setting functional boundaries.

Transformative justice requires us, at minimum, to ask ourselves questions like these before we jump, teeth bared, for the jugular.

I think this is some of the hardest work. It’s not about pack hunting an external enemy, it’s about deep shifts in our own ways of being.

But if we want to create a world in which conflict and trauma aren’t the center of our collective existence, we have to practice something new, ask different questions, access again our curiosity about each other as a species.

And so much more.

I want us to do better. I want to feel like we are responsible for each other’s transformation. Not the transformation from vibrant flawed humans to bits of ash, but rather the transformation from broken people and communities to whole

ones. I believe transformative justice could yield deeper trust, resilience, and interdependence. All these mass and intimate punishments keep us small and fragile. And right now our movements and the people within them need to be massive and complex and strong.

I want to hear what y'all think, and what you're practicing in the spirit of transformative justice. Towards wholeness and evolution, loves.

⁷⁰ *Merriam Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience.

⁷¹ This made me think of Anohni's lyric on *Hopelessness*: "Why did you separate me from the earth?"

⁷² Published at adriennemareebrown.net, and edited for *Make/shift* 18 (December 2015).

⁷³ This quote was originally posted on Ryan Li Dahlstrom's Facebook page and is shared with permission.