

LOVING CORRECTIONS

adrienne maree brown

EMERGENT STRATEGY SERIES

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Afterword by Janine de Novais

Emergent Strategies Series

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Acknowledgments

I stand corrected, over and over and over in my life. I am grateful to all of the beloved teachers who were willing to get me together. *Loving Corrections* is dedicated to everyone who loved me enough to pull me close, and to the Black feminists who wrote their lessons down and spoke them and sang them to me—the ancestors, yes, thank you bell hooks, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Lucille Clifton, Charity Hicks, Mama Lila Cabbil, Elandria Williams—as well as my living comrades and loved ones, Autumn Brown, April Brown, Jennifer Kidwell, Dani McClain, Janine de Novais, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Toshi Reagon, Sangodare Wallace, Laura Wallace, Tchaiko Omawale, Dana King, Jael Humphries, Malkia Devich-Cyril, Makani Themba, Denise Perry, Jill Petty, Imani Perry, NTanya Lee, Hallie Hobson, Walidah Imarisha, Ayana Jamieson, Celeste Faison, Moya Bailey, Michaela Harrison, Mia Herndon, Sage Crump, dream hampton, Barbara Ransby, Thenjiwe McHarris, Maurice Moe Mitchell, Gina Dent, Angela Davis, Fania Davis, Mariame Kaba, Omisade Burney-Scott, Sonya Renee Taylor, Prentis Hemphill, Sendolo Diaminah, Charlene Carruthers, Mary Hooks, Patrisse Cullors, Ash-Lee Woodward Henderson, Charlotte Brathwaite, gina Breedlove, Mawulisa Thomas-Adeyemo, Mia Birdsong, Amber Butts, Derrick Carr, Sade Lythcott, Jonathan McCrory, Andrea Ritchie, Ijeoma Oluo, Krista Franklin, Lottie Spady, Alta Starr, Jennifer Toles, Adaku Utah, Mark-Anthony Johnson, Everette Renee Harvey Thompson, Holiday Simmons, J Wortham, Kimberly Drew, Courtney Sebring, Joie Lou Shakur, Junauda Alma, Thelma Golden, Aja Taylor, Nicole Newman, Alexis De Veaux, Rev. angel kyodo williams, Rachel Cargle, Stacey Ann Chin, Rev. Rhetta Morgan, Danielle Mahones, Ava Duvernay, Heather McGhee, PG Watkins, Amanda Seales, Indya Moore, Aja Monet, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, Warsan Shire, Saul Williams, Syrus Marcus Ware, Tarana Burke, and Yaba Blay. I know I will remember more names as soon as this is off to print. If it's your name I forgot, please know that in my heart and the shape of my life, you are remembered.

Introduction: Being in Right Relationship

We need each other. *Loving Corrections* is about *how much* we need each other. We need to learn how to be, to learn the impact of who we are, and to explore which small, individual shifts can accumulate into community practice and ultimately yield the greatest collective changes. The *corrections* referred to in the title are intended to allow us more authentic access to each other from nuanced positions of power, history, and resources.

I became especially interested in thinking about my relationships to corrections and accountability—how I held myself and others accountable—through my facilitation work. Even among those of us who long for justice and liberation, I noticed an emerging trend within our movements that looked and felt like policing each other, disposing of each other, and destroying each other.

As a facilitator, I have been able, sometimes, through speaking the truth and expanding my heart to hold more possibilities, to intervene on that trend. This was a strategy that I grew into; I learned to trust myself to articulate and embody liberatory values in moments that felt impossible, and to hold containers large enough for everyone to change and grow. But I also began to ask myself what it looks like to be steady in our offerings of love to each other, even as we learn together and learn from each other.

In recent writing—particularly *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation* and *We Will Not Cancel Us*—I explored facilitation, mediation, and what it looks like to engage in conflict with a sense of belonging, with special attention to transformative justice. I began to see ways we could transform our movements to transform the world.¹ And in the processes that led to *Holding Change* and *We Will Not Cancel Us*, I wrote things that generated corrections from people I trusted; I had to work hard, grow up, and change to be able to receive this feedback and sharpen my work.

But it is in the shapeshifting dojo of my deepest relationships—with family, friends, political comrades, lovers, and other beloveds—that I have come to understand how ideas that are oppositional to my survival, ideas I have come to overtly disagree with as I have developed my own politic, have still shaped me, and are rooted into me. Only loving corrections have

helped me become intentional about who and how I want to be and grow.

Accountability is a tricky thing. When I don't believe someone cares about my life—much less my work—I close myself to their critiques. I don't want to risk the total erasure of my heart, and strangers are really reckless these days. I have known days where I thought myself worse than useless, based on fickle trends of uninformed hateration. I am more known than some and less known than others, and everyone I have discussed this with, at any level of visibility, is familiar with the sense of fear that comes with wanting to show some true parts of ourselves to the world without being torn apart. We develop skin so thick that it's hard for us to discern when we receive loving feedback, necessary corrections.

Now, when I know someone loves me and wants to see me thrive, I seek out their feedback. Even if it's hard to hear, I know that someone who wants to help me see all of myself and be in the power of knowing myself is sharing something of value with me. In my somatics scholarship, I learned that feedback from others should not be received as *the* truth, but as *a* truth; this was quite liberating.² I used to let each morsel of feedback decenter me, until I was quite lost from who I was and how I felt about things. Now, I take feedback in as something currently true to someone who loves me. I let it simmer, distill, and keep what is useful to me, what I can work with and grow in.³

Each of these essays is meant to be experienced that way—not as *the* truth from on high, but as something true to me in the moment of writing it, uttered with love and a desire to deepen. Each piece of writing is me dropping into the most loving stance I know, to address patterns I see in the communities I love and live for: communities of people on the margins; people who have been oppressed and hurt and long for peace and justice; and communities finding our way into right relationship with each other, and the earth. These patterns challenge me, sometimes explicitly oppress me, and sometimes deny key aspects of my existence. Sometimes, I am contributing to the most disappointing or misaligned aspects of the pattern.

For example, until my sisters and I developed a practice, between visits, of regularly checking in with each other about our trials, triumphs, and other tests, we spent many years falling into the unhappy habit of fighting or being disagreeable with each other at our too-rare family gatherings. I was a skilled facilitator out in the world, but at home I would curl up into a

childhood shape. In “Sisters Checking In,” our extended interview in *Loving Corrections*, April, Autumn, and I discuss the origins of this practice, and explore how it’s changed our relationships with each other, as well as other relationships within our family, and other people in our individual circles and communities.

Indeed, to find the courage and will to write each of these pieces, I had to decide not to give up on us. All of us! I asked myself: What does it mean to intentionally decide to stay in relationship with humanity, to not count anyone out based on identity? What if I didn’t take it all personally? What if I saw the patterns that most offend me as instigation for my own growth? What if these patterns helped me to set better boundaries and increase my own self-adoration? What if I wanted to maximize my potential to be in right relationship with everyone I meet?

These essays were not written in a vacuum. *Loving Corrections* is a continuation of *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*; *We Will Not Cancel Us*; and *Holding Change*. *Emergent Strategy* began my exploration of looking to the natural world, including our own human nature, to understand how we can be in better relationship with each other as we shape the changes of our time. In *We Will Not Cancel Us*, I dove deeper into the wounded places that make us want to let go of or destroy each other. In *Holding Change*, I offered up everything I know about facilitating and mediating spaces, especially where we are trying to move together through difference.

Now, with *Loving Corrections*, I am exploring how we get specific, and deeper, when we have accumulated the wisdom to challenge the harmful norms of privilege and power. My hope is that these loving corrections will help us to be more efficient in facing our hardest work. We know better ways of navigating whiteness, masculinity, ableism. How do we get clear and courageous when it is time to intervene? And how do we intervene while staying in a relationship with those we love? Right now, almost everything about our society is deeply divisive. We live in wildly divergent bubbles of information that make it easy to dismiss each other’s ideas and contexts. This book is about inviting people to solid ground and inviting people to be in deeper integrity with their own values and the impacts of their actions, speech, and lives.

In *Emergent Strategy*, I quoted Jasmine Wallace, a Tsalagi (Cherokee)

traditional healer, who says, “The mountains, streams, valleys, oceans, deserts, and all things are related to our thoughts and actions. All things are in relationship with each other” (p. 5). Ideally, it is enough to just recognize the relationship of all things, to understand that everything is connected. But in this period of human history, we are aware of all kinds of toxic and dangerous relationships. So when I say “right relationship,” it is shorthand for relationships that are authentic, organic, healthy, present, healing, nourishing, well-boundaried, interdependent, and just.

If we learn the lessons of emergent strategy, we understand that change is constant, and one element of our human work is to apply our reasoning capacity to the changes we must make together, in ways that are life supporting. If we understand that we cannot cancel other living beings from the world, then how do we find dignified ways of being in communities that face, address, and evolve beyond harmful patterns? If we accept that each of us has some responsibility for holding the massive changes needed for our survival, then how do we hold each other close enough to learn our hardest lessons? *Loving Corrections* is about learning to attend to the quality of connection, knowing it is fortified by our direct and timely communication.

This book has also allowed me to celebrate tools and inspiration offered by mentors and teachers, including Octavia Butler, Grace Lee Boggs, and most especially in this volume, Ursula Le Guin. In “Celebrating Ursula and Her Loving Corrections,” I reflect on the astonishing gifts of this once-in-a-lifetime writer, and how her world-making fiction, art making, and letter writing pushed others—including me—to come correct, expand our imaginations, and explore our most radical possibilities. As Le Guin notes, there is joy in discovering new ways to do things, experimentation, and telling our truth.

Nature, including our own human development, is another powerful and beautiful teacher of loving corrections. Adaptations are the way the natural world keeps life moving toward life. That which does not serve life becomes obsolete, and that which we need emerges. Mountains walk slowly—stone by stone, changing under the pressure of raindrops and wind. But not all the adaptations are loving. In our greed and cluelessness, humans have made so many species disappear because we did not value them, and did not understand soon enough how to cohabitate, how this world is meant

to be shared, even with those species we don't necessarily understand. In the same way we have lost so many precious and unique species and places on this planet, we are losing valuable cultural gifts and distinctions, losing our capacity to understand which differences are good and healthy for us, and which are too dangerous to tolerate.

Much of my work and writing suggests that there are ways to tell the truth, ways to invite self and community examination, and ways to listen. This book is for those of us willing to be in the murmur of human life on earth with each other, willing to change together, to move toward life together. It is for those who want to be solution-oriented, but who can get sucked into deconstruction and judgment that destroys others, rather than destroying the toxic concepts that "go viral" among us. This book primarily looks at dominant cultures engaged in practices that isolate them from the whole, and each essay is an invitation back into belonging.

There may be different audiences for each essay, so take what you need, and pass the rest on to whoever needs it. I learned the lessons of this writing by living vigorously, and I will continue to learn—that is my promise. I am working hard not to be afraid to speak a truth when I see and feel it, so some of the content in these pages may be uncomfortable to read—it was uncomfortable to feel and write.

But it feels like the social and environmental justice movements of my dreams, the movements big enough to invite the world into the future, are making these loving corrections. I foresee a movement with a wide stance, a strong connection to ancestral wisdom, a fortified sense of self that inspires all who see and touch and join it. We spend our time transforming ourselves and our relationships to earth and each other. We show the way with our bodies and behavior, rather than shaming anyone for where they are. There is love at the center. To get there, we need to create conditions that support dignity for each person, and stop confusing identity with community. Building and sustaining communities that can survive and create more possibilities together—that is movement work. We are tasked with challenging the regressive policies and beliefs that separate us, reminding our species that we belong to this earth and to each other. We need to do the work of honestly engaging in community as students of belonging.

Throughout this reading experience, please keep asking yourself "How

can I grow?” and “Do I know anyone who needs this medicine?” and “Can I add to this medicine?” Let go of what isn’t yours to carry and focus on being strong in carrying your particular life and lessons.

With love,
amb

1. Grace Lee Boggs taught us to “transform ourselves to transform the world.”

2. Somatics is the study of the body in its wholeness, and practices that help us return to a felt sense of wholeness. For more, check out The Embodiment Institute founded by Prentis Hemphill and Kasha Ho, <https://www.theembodimentinstitute.org>; Staci Haines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2019); and Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathways to Healing Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

3. Mariame Kaba gave me this feedback at a crucial moment, so when I say it I hear it in her voice.

Ruminations

Righting Gender: Relinquishing the Patriarchy

Dear Men,

This is mostly a note to straight, cis men but also goes out to trans men, queer men, and all who participate in masculinity. If you see yourself in these words, this is a love note to you.

Patriarchy (the system of society/government in which those who are perceived in the social roles of men hold the power and those perceived in the social roles of women are excluded from it) is collapsing, and it's time for you, too, to give it up, to get yourself out.

It won't be easy.

I don't believe total revolution or liberation happens in one generation, but I know from my own life and the many lives I have witnessed and accompanied, that it is absolutely possible in your lifetime—in a generation—to personally relinquish an unjust ideology, to begin to practice a more evolved way of being.

When enough of us relinquish injustices that only pretend to benefit us, we tip society toward justice.

In my life, I have been homophobic, transphobic, classist, ableist, and, yes, patriarchal. And I have been able to turn and face each of those parts of myself, to consider that what I know to be right might, in fact, be wrong. Is wrong. I have held many wrong ideas close.

But! Right, or more precisely, right relationship, is available to me. I have learned that in the United States, normal is still understood to be a white, US citizen, who has degrees, is (or is married to) a cis male, straight, and able-bodied. I have learned that I should not fear, disregard, or think other people are lesser because they were born outside of a false concept of "normal." The only people I've ever truly needed to fear are those who believe they are superior to me/others. And the only part of me that is truly monstrous is the part that has been trained to believe and persuade others that I am superior, because of my proximity to these false norms: I am American-born, light-skinned, college-educated, cis-ish, briefly able-bodied, et cetera. The pain I have caused others in my life has been born of these false superiorities, which made me believe I deserved more of the goodness of existence for doing less physical, mental, or emotional work.

Now I am trying every day to do my share, to carry my portion of miracle

and suffering, to labor fairly. To examine my privileges and to dismantle, with my choices and behaviors, the largest unjust systems in this world. To do this work, I've had to learn to listen to things I didn't want to hear; things I didn't want to believe.

Now I am listening to so many women in my life navigate the incremental demise of patriarchy. They are trying to find intimacy and partnership with men who were socialized to believe they should be the head of the household, the provider and protector; men who are no longer primary breadwinners, men who are no longer the default hire or raise or boss. The straight women are exhausted, scared, lonely, and rushed. So many of these women have confided in me, "I wish sexuality were a choice! If I could choose to be with a woman I would in a heartbeat." I do not want to imply here that women are above patriarchy or other diseases, or in any way minimize the complexities of queer love. But the frequency with which I have heard this from straight women speaks to a particular desperation, heartbreak, and confusion about how to be met in intimate relationship in this lifetime.

These are women who are straight, or . . . mostly straight, and I am watching them battle their way out of patriarchy, only to resign themselves to painful compromise or dignified solitude.

So, I offer here a brief primer for men who want intimacy, informed by emergent strategy and pleasure activism, and by life. This is for men who don't want to be alone; who want to be part of communities; who don't want to be a burden to humanity; and who want to be trustworthy! This is for men who don't want to be assholes and fuckbois and distant dads, but who nevertheless can't see how they are perpetuating patriarchy.

This is for men who want to know love in their lives.

If a woman tells you she is tired, that the dynamic of labor between you is imbalanced, it means you have been carried by her without realizing or honoring it. In naming this, she is reaching for interdependence with you. We are in a set of transition generations, most of us with mothers who were taught to keep their labor out of sight, which means many men grew up in households where the full-time work of managing the home was intentionally invisible. This is especially true if you grew up with a father at home—you would come home from school, see your dad come home from working out in the world, see your mom make a meal and serve it with a

smile on. Then she would clean dishes while your dad watched TV and you did your homework.

Maybe you did one chore, like cleaning your own room, or taking out garbage you'd helped create. You may have learned to do these chores as if they were a rare favor to your mother, rather than a reasonable expectation for a human that makes messes and produces waste as a part of life.

If you grew up with a single mother, you may have been brought into more of this work, helping your mom. But a sizable number of you got the benefit of a mother who was trying to cover the ground of both mother and father, who felt guilty in some way for "not being able to keep a family together." She may have coddled you even more, to make up for what society told her was her failure.

What you most likely didn't see, or saw but didn't register as crucial labor, was how the laundry, cleaning, fixing, gardening, the clothing and grocery shopping, mailing, mending, financial management, and planning took place. You didn't see how hard and necessary that work is.

I have seen many relationships where a man takes on one or two of these areas of crucial labor and thinks things are balanced.

I have seen many situations in which men think caring for the children they cocreated is "babysitting" or "providing childcare," briefly inhabiting a role that should primarily belong to the woman co-parent.

When men are left even briefly with labor that women regularly do, I've often seen how quickly they are overwhelmed. The results range from neglect (the home is dirty, the kid is sitting in a poopy diaper, the sick wife is hungry, etc.) to full-out adult male tantrums (to paraphrase: "You didn't even thank me for doing the things you do every day!").

Which brings me to my next point. If a woman says that you are scaring her, you are. And you probably have been for some time—it usually takes us a while to gather the words of our fear. She is telling you this because something in your behavior has become physically or emotionally unsafe. Domestic violence isn't always a bruised eye; there are so many ways to terrorize an intimate. Sometimes her fear is the only signal to a woman that she's in a dangerous situation—there are some fears we can't trick ourselves out of, even if we love y'all.

I have witnessed men (who I thought "knew better") in states of road rage, alcohol-induced rage, property destruction, physical intimidation, and

gaslighting/manipulation intended to make their female partners feel crazy. If this is what they do in front of a witness, I know it's worse when they are alone with their partners and are not concerned about being seen.

I have seen men endangering their children in these moments. I have heard stories of men grabbing their partners and children, hitting them, pushing them against walls, and giving them the silent treatment for days.

Men, you must learn to be responsible for your own feelings and actions, and this is difficult for a number of reasons—most of which are related to how you were raised to depend on partners. Most men expect to be mothered by women they get involved with.

There are many reasons why men's default relational approach is codependency.⁴ For example, you aren't encouraged to feel your feelings. In fact, you are told the opposite; you are told it isn't manly to cry, to need comfort, to feel longing. You are ridiculed for emotions that aren't weaponized, for what is categorized as feminine behavior, like gentleness.

You aren't encouraged to have real friendships. "Activity bros" are different; you may have guys you go play ball with or drink with. You may even have men you complain to, perhaps even clichéd complaints about the demands women and others are making of you to gr/show up. But at a certain age, all humans need mirrors, witnesses, people they can trust to hear their lives, to cut through any victim narratives, and help them pivot away from behaviors that harm themselves and others. That's literally what friends are for. Women are actively doing this for each other right now, witnessing each other, reaching for our own lives, holding each other's hands as we walk toward our power. Y'all need to get in right relationship!

Another factor is that you aren't encouraged to get professional help. Again, many of you think therapy is only for "crazy" people or that it is only women who need this kind of support, so you refuse to see the therapists or healers who could support your evolution and maturity. Or maybe you perpetually stall and pile harm on top of harm on the person who has carried your emotional load, in addition to her own. You end up unhinged, unstable, not rooted in reality—in many ways, acting out the definition of what people call "crazy." In my mediations, facilitation, and friendships, I've learned that nearly everyone has the potential to be "crazy." The difference in how much negative impact our crazy has on ourselves and others is related to who has adequate support structures and

rigorous practices when the storms of adulthood come, and who doesn't. Therapy, friends, meditation, repeat.

Too few mental health practitioners and others who offer professional help recognize patriarchy as a disorder, as a type of mental illness. I will say it as clearly as I can: believing that masculinity is an element of mental, physical, emotional, economic, or other superiority, that it exempts you from labor but also makes you more powerful, is disease. Therapists and healers can be of best service when they recognize this and stop normalizing patriarchal expectations, especially for men who exhibit other "socially acceptable" diseases, such as white supremacy, or extreme wealth.

So, for example, if a woman tells you she needs to set up boundaries, step back immediately, and listen to her. Respect the lines she draws between you. If she needs space from you, don't antagonize her . . . offer her space. And silence.

This can be hard for heterosexual, cis men, who are often trained to pursue and capture women. Seeing women as human, not prey, can be a lifelong journey for men unlearning patriarchy, unlearning woman-as-belonging, or woman-as-prize.

Boundaries are also hard for men whose default relationship position is, as mentioned, codependency. I have been shocked at the number of processes I have witnessed and/or supported where men, in the absence of friends or professional support, expect the people they've worn down and disrespected and sometimes abused, to be their primary support through breakdowns, breakups, new adventures, and figuring out how to adult.

She can't help you with that. She's tired, scared, and needs her own space to heal.

It is time for fractal accountability; each unit of masculinity has to heal, to become part of a healed identity. You *must* recognize that you are a part of a seductive and dying system of holding imbalanced privileges. You *must* opt out, even when everything in your system screams "double down!," "control her!" You *must* be willing to understand that patriarchy is a million small daily choices to shirk responsibility, to assume power you haven't earned, to be mothered by your partners . . . you *must* learn to see those choices and add more options into your life. The good news is, there are practices that work. Here are steps I guarantee will help you relinquish patriarchy:

1. **Recognize that, as a man, you are a part of patriarchy.** Even if you have made some effort to break out of it, the system/insanity of patriarchy is still there for you to fall back into when you are under pressure or duress, even if you aren't straight, white, or wealthy.

2. **Be particularly vigilant about your masculinity growing toxic as you reach your thirties to fifties.** For many of us, these are the decades when the weight of adulting gets real and feels too heavy, and the dreams we had for our lives may not be coming true—hence the pattern of midlife crises. This is when men can become strangers to the women who trust them. Yes, change is constant, and we all deserve space to change, but no one deserves a pass to change in ways that make us more harmful to those with less systemic power, especially those who have carried us.

3. **Don't get into language supremacy or I've-read-the-most-feminists supremacy.** Don't think that you are better than other men because you know the language of patriarchy, feminism, and other isms. This is patriarchy's overcharged competitive nature, the desire to be better than, the inappropriate topping itself that is toxic.

4. **Release any belief that your mind will liberate you from patriarchy.** The change required now is not something you can learn or do with your mind alone; it is something you must practice with your body, emotions, and soul. Only consistent practice will rewire your mind and liberate your life.

5. **Practice trusting the women in your life** to help you see what you cannot see. Seek, wrestle with, trust, and apply their feedback.

6. **Practice shared labor.** Ask to take on tasks and change the dynamic of labor because you want to and/or you should, not as if you are relieving her of a burden or helping her out. Don't ask her how to do these things. She doesn't just magically know; she has long worked at learning/creating all of this.

7. **Practice sitting in groups with other men** (a group of two is a fine and valiant beginning) and speaking of feelings. Do not offer solutions or try to cheer each other up. Invite the feelings as they are—sadness, heartbreak, abandonment, fear, trauma from the process of masculinization. Be there for each other. Listen. Build friendships of radical honesty.

8. **Practice taking action together.** Go to marches to protect women's rights, volunteer to hold the line at abortion clinics, intervene on observed

acts of misogyny and patriarchy in private and public!

9. Practice finding something other than women to blame for your feelings. Consider that your own behavior might be the cause of the hardships you are currently experiencing.

10. Practice listening to the truth: ask the women in your life how they have survived you. This is not to say that all women are innocent, or never abusive/controlling/unfair/harmful but rather that women have most often engaged in those strategies to navigate staying safe and sane inside of patriarchy. Ask her how she carries burdens that are emotional, economic, or fear based, and those related to child-rearing and home management.

11. Practice equality in the workplace. If you are offered a raise, ask who else is getting one. Share your salary information with women colleagues so they can know if they are underpaid. If you advocate for a raise, advocate for women's raises too. If you're able to make those decisions about hiring/pay, never ask how much someone was paid in their last job. Pay them relative to those around them.

12. Make a list of things you believe you are owed by the world. If there's anything you think you are owed that others are not, get curious about that. Begin to release that way of thinking. You deserve dignity, belonging, and safety. You also deserve love, community, respect. You deserve pleasure and joy. Not at the expense of half the world, but alongside us.

13. Seek professional help. Require that your therapists and/or healers identify as feminists. A feminist therapist will not necessarily be a woman. Being feminist simply means believing in the equality of men and women. Not the sameness, but the equality—no sex is superior or inferior.

14. Read. I recommend:

The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love, bell hooks.⁵

Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics, bell hooks.⁶

"The Combahee River Collective Statement."⁷

Men Explain Things to Me, Rebecca Solnit.⁸

Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, Brene Brown.⁹

Men, do these things even if you think you're already doing them, even if you think you already know all this and think you are already all right. We

all have much to learn and to listen to.

The fall of patriarchy is inevitable. It is #metoo, it is #timesup. It is your turn, specifically, to lead by transforming yourself into the kind of man who always feels safe to women, femmes, and children. Those are the men who will be allowed into the future.

This is your invitation, shaped by goddesses/woes (my inner circle of brilliant women).

4. Recommended reading: Melody Beattie, *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2022).

5. bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004).

6. bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

7. The Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” accessed October 24, 2023, available at <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977>.

8. Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

9. Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery Publishing, 2015).

Righting Imagination:

Celebrating Ursula and Her Loving Corrections

I create alternatives. I show that alternatives exist. Probably the sum total of my message to the world is that you do not have to do it one way. We are so single track oriented. But there are alternatives. And it's such fun. Once you start, it's enormous. It's an aesthetic pleasure. To think in a different way. To think of a different way of doing things, to imagine what it would be.

—*Ursula Le Guin*



In 2016, I served as the Ursula Le Guin Science Fiction and Feminism

Scholar. One of the beautiful privileges of this post was getting to dive deep into Le Guin's papers in the library at the University of Oregon in Eugene, and finding endless, endless treasures.

In 2017, I was writing and collecting content—text and images initially intended for an Ursula Le Guin sci-fi and social justice zine—and I began communicating with Hester Tittmann, a gifted designer. Together, we were hoping to create something beautiful to offer to Ursula, and ultimately, to her devoted community of readers.

By the winter of 2018, Ursula had transitioned. She died on January 18th, a few months after her eighty-ninth birthday, and I was grieving, deeply. I was grieving her as a writer I'd looked up to, and grieving the opportunity to place her work in the context of current social justice while she could still see it.

Yet out of the blue, I received another gift from her.

Another, because Ursula has given me so many gifts, so many stories that fundamentally shifted how I understood the world, ideas that opened new parts of my mind. This gift, however, was more tangible. It wasn't direct, but it was important. I heard about the gift from Walidah Imarisha, my coeditor for *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements*. She sent a thrilled text: "Someone who was . . . given jewelry by Ursula to distribute . . . offered each of us one of Ursula's ear cuffs!!!" I only texted in all caps for a while after that.

And what divine timing. It was part of my grieving process to work on the project, which might be why I kept not quite finishing it. After all, when it was completed, some part of my direct work with Ursula's texts would also be completed. But the gift of the cuff—which arrived a week later in a tin that belonged to Le Guin's husband, Charles, along with two small pieces of candy from the dish Le Guin kept on her desk—felt like nudges: finish it, finish it.

I've revisited the content of that unpublished zine and refashioned it into an essay for *Loving Corrections*. This piece is still meant to be a love note, an invitation to let love guide you into the work of Ursula Le Guin. But I'm also thinking here about how Ursula practiced loving corrections in her work, writing, and life.

If you look at her bibliography you can see that Ursula's publishing life really took off in the late 1960s, when she was in her late thirties. She was

prolific for decades after that, publishing multiple short stories and novels each year, often set in entirely different worlds.

So far, I have read nearly twenty of her books and story collections, and I would recommend every single one of them, for different reasons. In my opinion, *The Dispossessed*, her 1974 novel about utopia, is required reading. In it, she explores freedom, humanity, justice, and imagination through the lens of a brilliant scientist named Shevek who lives on an anarchist moon.

Ursula was a remarkable, prolific writer who offered us many worlds, many societies that were, at the root, liberated in some way from the constraints of our society. Ursula explored anarchism, feminism, climate justice, race, Indigenous sovereignty, nonmonogamy, cooperation, and non-linearity in the realms of mythology, fantasy, science fiction, and essays.

For instance, Ursula crafted beautiful worlds in which she lovingly corrected our relationship to capitalism (*The Dispossessed*), our confusion around gender (*The Left Hand of Darkness*), and how we approach intimate and familial relationships (most texts in *The Hainish Cycle*). She was voracious in her pursuit of ideas, writing novels, poems, songs, chants, and spells. She also made art: sketches of places in the natural world around her and of places in her imagination. She wrote a translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. She wrote about writing. Ursula was a force, a creator, and a radical thinker.

In addition to these formal pieces of writing, Ursula Le Guin edited volumes of other peoples' work, wrote short stories beyond what we find in her collections, and seemingly penned several full-length letters each day. Some of these were to her editor, or to collaborators on different collections, and many were written to her fans. But a great portion of her writing was letters to the editor of her local paper, standing up on behalf of trees, or against war, or pointing out patriarchy. Ursula also wrote to comrades, peers, to those who wished to learn from her and those who rose to the challenge of critical engagement with her. She wrote so many letters that, though I spent a week in her archives, I didn't come close to making a dent in the surface of her word pile. She wrote to those who offended her, to those who impressed her, and to close friends. Very briefly, she even wrote to me.

I include here a small sampling of her letter writing:

From Ursula's letter to Philip K. Dick, on how he wrote women characters, February 25, 1981

Dear Phil,

Ok—Right—God knows I have never wakened, only dreamed, Or been dreamed, or whatever. And I don't care if you're crazy, or crazy like a fox, or the sanest man in California, or all three, with a great artist these distinctions are irrelevant—a real artist—and that you are, I know that much. But I get scared by your recent books & stories, and especially *Valis*, because it seems like you hate women now, and the part of you that is woman is denied and despised. It's all yang & no yin, all heaven and no earth, all Word & no matter. And I'm not at home there, I'm shut out, I can no longer follow your art, which has been such a joy and solace to me.

But I keep trying!

Love,

Ursula

Ursula's undated letter to local Portland paper, honoring a neighborhood tree

To the Editor:

This is a lament for an old tree, a horse-chestnut tree on Northwest Thurman Street.

An old man is boasting now around the neighborhood that he called up the city and said: You should cut down that tree, it leans over the street, it's dangerous, you should come cut it down.

And they came. Nice fellows, hard working men doing their job; the city sent them, and they came. They cut the tree down, piece by piece, limb by limb; it took them two days, a whole team of men and heavy expensive equipment to kill and carry off the tree. It was a big tree, a great one, sound-limbed, with strong roots.

An old man, well-meaning or ill-meaning, who couldn't even see the tree from his house, called up and said, kill it, and they did. Did they get a second opinion? Did they ask us, who live in the house the tree sheltered, or our neighbors on whose parking the main root system was (and is) or the families across the street, in the block, in the neighborhood—the tree's neighbors—who drive or walk past now looking angry, looking stunned? Did they ask anybody if they agreed it was indeed dangerous? Did they offer any of us that reason? Did they offer any of us any choice? No. They

didn't.

Killing is so much easier than talking. Talking gets harder and harder; killing gets easier and easier. Waking in the night I feel the absence of those great branches outside our window, as they say people feel pain in a limb that has been amputated that isn't there. The city of Portland has taken a quarter of a century of golden autumns away from me. It has killed a beloved part of my life, without a reason and without a word. This is not how it should be done. This is not how it should be.

Ursula K. Le Guin
3321 N.W. Thurman St.

From Ursula's undated letter to Pramila Jayapal, on the success of Harry Potter

. . . I will read Harry Potter when I get old enough to outgrow the soreness that all the praise and hype caused my silly ego. People kept rushing at me shouting O have you read this Wonderful Original book about a School for Wizards isn't that a GREAT IDEA? and what was I to say? I said Yes, I thought so too, politely, but sometimes I lost my temper and said Yes, I thought so too when I made it up—and then I felt mean and pusillanimous. I HATE envy!!!! Or is it jealousy? —Anyhow I will grow up, eventually. Maybe at 75?

From Willamette Week article about Ursula's letter to the owner of Powell's Books about store workers seeking to unionize, March 17, 1999

Disgruntled Powell's employees took to the streets last week, but they aren't the only ones advocating union representation at the landmark bookstore.¹⁰

WW has learned that prolific local author Ursula K. Le Guin has urged store owner Michael Powell to recognize the union effort. The noted science fiction writer shared her views in a letter sent to Powell in January, when the International Longshoreman Warehouse Union increased its organizing activity among the 300-some non-management bookstore workers.

At press time, Le Guin was out of town and could not be reached for comment. Neither the union nor the management would provide WW with a copy of the letter but sources who have seen it say Le Guin struck a cordial tone, reminding Powell of their shared love of literature and stating that

she'd prefer to shop in a store where she knew employees were fairly represented.

.....

When I reflect on these letters now, and on Ursula's commitment to writing, crafting, and sending them, I can see how they were her own efforts at loving and transformative corrections.

For example, she is staying connected and loving while intervening on toxic masculinity in her writing to Dick; she is weaving herself into her community, writing about her own passion for trees and collective effort; and she is advocating for the rights of workers, writing to Powell. I even read a loving correction for herself in her vulnerable writing about Harry Potter—many writers understand how it feels to see your ideas move through other hands and writers, and the effort to release ownership while also wanting proper credit.

Le Guin was also someone who aimed to challenge everything about the world we live in, using fiction to do that work. As I plumbed her archives, I saw that she deployed her letter writing in the same way.

The Infinite Space of Science Fiction

Part of the reason I read science fiction passionately, geekily, and studiously is because I want to learn how humans generate imagination and vision. For my entire conscious life, I have participated in movements trying to improve the world, and I have noticed that we activists suffer from a massive deficit of imagination.

We are skilled at critiquing, analyzing, deconstructing, memorizing, reiterating, complaining about, and hating on the capitalist system, the people who hold power in this system, those complicit in it, and, of course, ourselves. And these are important skills. They are skills that help us share a complex picture; lay the foundation for strategy; and vent, which is critical because sometimes articulating problems helps us to survive to work another day.

But sci-fi helped me vision and imagine beyond our current paradigm, and it was empowering. All through my early journey of doing social justice work, I was reading science fiction as if it were a top-secret activity.

They were texts relevant to movement work, but I didn't know how to say that to "serious activists." Could I admit that I was reading sci-fi to engage and remake philosophy, and to learn about new ways to transform the world?

And then years ago, I realized my relationship to Black science fiction writer Octavia Butler was much deeper than fandom—I was a scholar. Having grown up in a military family with a Christian framework for my spiritual life, I read her work over and over again, finding purpose and direction, and ideas that deeply challenged my worldviews.

Le Guin is the second author in my life to inspire such devoted scholarship. There are many writers I have read and loved, returned to, referenced, quoted, and celebrated. Their work has inspired me to embrace my responsibility to challenge cultural norms, and to experiment with collaboration and community building in every story I write. Yet Le Guin's prodigious imagination and exploration invited me beyond the binaries of existing movements, and beyond the binaries of our known world. This influence informs *Loving Corrections*, as well; we are correcting toward a way of being that we haven't fully experienced, seeding our dreams into a fluid, spectrum, spacious, connected moral ground. We have to take the best of what we understand to work at a small scale, and apply our learnings to a multicultural, globally woven existence.

My week with Ursula Le Guin's papers at the University of Oregon happened to overlap with an exhibit featuring art from her collection: her drawings of characters, trees, boats on the water, mountain and desert landscapes, and small animals. Le Guin sketched the world. Her pieces were simple, accurate, precise; line work drawn by someone with the patience to truly observe the world around her.

As she entered and inhabited various creative realms, her worlds became more tangible and sensational; they were worlds with histories, languages, and destinies beyond our own. In addition to the narrative, Le Guin's expansive approaches to creating sounds, visuals, meter, and the rhythm of her worlds help readers to experience each place more completely. Her talent allows us to understand both the humanity and the alien nature that characterizes her fiction.

The Dispossessed was the first of Le Guin's works that I read, and it felt like a 341-page first kiss from a new beloved. We are taken into a fully

functional anarchist society, seeing it from multiple angles, each emphasizing relationships, education, justice, housing, food, labor, health, governance, individual creativity, and discovery. Even as Le Guin reveals to us a capitalist utopia (the planet around which the anarchist moon orbits), it is from the perspective of this anarchist society, and with a gentle touch. We witness Shevek's sensational experiences of food, clothing, architecture, and culture, and how these luxuries, paired with personal accolades, feel good; we can also see that they're not the healthiest things for humans to value or pursue.

The Dispossessed is visionary. It assumes that a group of humans succeeds in manifesting our visions of shared power, peace, and equality. It is a call to action; a foundational text for people who want to do social justice work; as such, it spoke to me. I have been doing social justice work for the past twenty years, including harm reduction and direct action. Though I didn't find it personally satisfying, I dabbled in electoral politics. For five years, I helmed The Ruckus Society, which offers training and resources for nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience; some participants in this work have gone on to support the Standing Rock and Black Lives Matter movements. Whenever I see a great direct action, I smile in my Ruckus heart, knowing that someone I respect is likely in the root system of whatever we see.

I learned that in some modern movement spaces, the term "anarchy" can be tossed around, and used in defiant and derogatory ways. It's often used as a synonym for "chaos," which is, to me, simply a measure of how committed mainstream society is to hierarchy and misunderstanding. The idea that without hierarchy there is chaos suggests that humans must be subject to an authority to survive, that it is the only way. In practice, though, we see that authoritarian societies quickly become inhumane. Creativity declines when those in power start to see art as a symbol of disobedience, health declines when all access and benefits are filtered through structures of control, while unjust behavior rises when we move our moral compass outside of ourselves.

Sometimes I promote *The Dispossessed* to movement comrades by saying, "You do [or you do not] call yourself an anarchist—you need to read this book." Le Guin's classic text offers a beautiful exploration of what it takes to commit oneself to complete freedom, and an examination of the

new challenges that arise from this commitment. And the novel doesn't feel like the education it is, until you finish it and realize you have been deeply challenged to rethink how you are living.

There are never any easy answers in Le Guin's work. Here is a new situation, proposition, and a new set of problems. For instance, here is a scheduled time to go have a bunch of group sex in a bathhouse (awesome, great job Ursula) but then here are some problems around consent, relationship, and accountability. For me, the work she does shows us how to think, how to avoid societal stagnation, and how to stay curious in relationship to each other. This, to me, is the root system of *Loving Corrections*: attending to how we think about ourselves and each other, how we retain our curiosity in the face of familiar and new problems.

Relatedly, Le Guin shares a powerful reimagining of justice in *The Dispossessed* through a simple episode of the main character, Shevek, being pulled into a fight, a petty conflict. The fight goes on until it's done, and no one intervenes. We see that violence and conflict in this imagined future generates neither fear nor obsession; no one stops to watch, and no one intervenes. The assumption is that people are powerful—not victims—and will ask for help when they need it. Since Shevek doesn't call out for help, the conflict is left to be completed by the two involved. *Can we imagine having conflict that was handled directly, that wasn't salacious; a conflict that we understood as a part of a cycle of relating?*

This vision of a society where violence and conflict are uninteresting, where everyone is seen in their power and full emotional breadth, created a yearning in me. I want to make that world come true, which has meant turning to face my own capacity for loving corrections, for facing conflict, discerning what is mine, supporting others in conflict, supporting mediation spaces, and trying to write in ways that create more space for direct resolution of conflict. After all, humans get frustrated and angry with each other! These interventions are more realistic and offer more to me than visions of absolute and complete peace.

In another scene, Shevek is tested by the fact that he's invented something of potential universal value—an “ansible,” an instant communication device—but he can't find adequate support for it on Anarres, the anarchist moon that is his home. As such, he faces an internal battle: does he choose to share this gift only with those who deeply share

his value system, or will he share it with everyone?

I also want to understand how we come up with things that are universal concepts, benefits. How do we share them across divergent belief systems? These are the questions Le Guin asks, that Butler asks. I believe my mentor Grace Lee Boggs was also considering this challenge of how to grow ideas abundantly without competition. It's not enough to have an idea and impose it on others. How do you transform yourself for the greater world? How do you take on the responsibility? When we can see ourselves as points of transformation in a freedom song, a loving correction is possible. When we see our own beliefs and actions as activities that allow ongoing learning, we can receive loving corrections from each other without losing the security of our community.

For example, there are so many interpersonal internet beefs that I wish "onlookers" would leave alone, so the actual people involved in the conflict might resolve or release it. Instead, people get pulled into fights they don't really know anything about, and often end up trying to make a complex situation into a simple case of "this one is good and this one is bad, this one is the perpetrator and this one is the victim."

As I was writing the notes for this essay, I was thinking about this as an adjacent problem for social justice workers: we are *so great* at judgment. We are great at coming up with detailed plans for how everyone else needs to change, what society needs to do, how everyone else is a mess, flawed, failing—we love to tell people about themselves, invite them to be told. And I am naming this tendency with love, because in this political moment, even for optimists, it can seem that there's not a lot of good going on.

Yet it's not enough to spend the time listing out how our opposition is horrible, deplorable—we've done that. How do we instead start to take on the responsibility of calling things out in real time as they happen, naming the society we want, flexing the muscle of imagination, and applying it to everything we practice? Even if you have a beautiful idea, how do you bring it back into the fold of community to advance it? What can you be practicing that seeds your idea into the material world?

When I coedited *Octavia's Brood* with Walidah Imarisha, the core question that our Brood writers came to was not specifically about the utopia or dystopia, but rather what do I do when I'm tested in a future as complex as the present? For example, how durable are my values to parent

a certain way, to enact justice, to preserve the health of the planet? What am I willing to sacrifice? Am I willing to give up my righteousness, my certainty about my political positions? Am I willing to learn that I was or *am* holding a wrong idea? Le Guin teaches us that no matter how you've been socialized, there will come a point when you are tested; when you will have to decide, as an individual, what you will do.

Ama Budge was the editor who worked with me on the Le Guin zine, right after Ursula had passed. Ama shared that her commitment to therapy had helped to reveal that “identifying the systems/events/actors in your oppression can also give you tools to dismantle its hold on you personally, to work out where extreme bouts of anger, sadness, grief, confusion, breakdown are stemming from.” She added that this had made it easier for her to “work for audacious visions and dreams that move us forward, that titillate and incite and guide us through and around and above the current systems, particularly when it comes to the aspects of our life that can challenge us on a personal level, such as interpersonal justice.”

In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek faces a variety of tests, including in his visit to Urras, a planet organized around wealth, luxury, and consumption. There he experienced surface-level pleasures like admiring women in topless ballgowns and the endless amount of food. This is contrasted to the deeper pleasures on Anarres, where they experience intimate relationships, community, and raise children together.

To prefer Anarres to Urras is a function of maturation, and it touches on the question: how do we transform our concept of what feels pleasurable to us? This is important to me, as I am a love and pleasure activist. I believe that *the body learns on yes*.¹¹ Affirm what is working and explain how to get to yes. We know this when giving advice about getting a lover to increase pleasure and delight. Yet too often the way we ask people to change is to highlight their flaws, to say “you’re so messy, you failed at this, you don’t know how to do justice, you used the wrong language for my whole people, I want to cut you off and write an article about it.”

The other way we can change is to receive and answer an invitation. In this way, we move toward changing the world and increasing justice—the most pleasurable experiences we can have. This also applies to offering loving corrections rather than punitive, harmful feedback. Like pleasure activism, emergent strategy is also relevant to loving corrections. For

example, we can learn about change from looking at the natural world, by exploring social justice applications of biomimicry, and by noticing patterns that move between the natural world and humans.

In a loving correction, we focus on aligning behind ideas rather than setting humans in binary systems, in which some of them are permanently wrong. If we can become skillful at staying connected through conflict, we can see paths where some of our most closely held ideas and practices evolve toward a collective future. People must be ready to work, to put effort and intention into communicating. And they must be willing to be vulnerable.

Our communication has to be less scripted—we have to open ourselves up to more surprises, more willingness to say, “We don’t know.” We are always bringing it home to our own selves and our relationships. For example, what does it mean when I must shift my practices to achieve the just world I want? What is the quality of relationship I have to be in to generate authentic accountability? One of the messages of *The Dispossessed* is to stop with the rampant individualism.

I prefer the feeling of being in harmony to the feeling of superiority. I’m going for, “I love exactly who I am, and I am living in the right time, doing the right work with the right people.” I think at the end of *The Dispossessed* that’s what Shevek is walking around feeling: “Maybe I don’t have all that, but I have all this and it’s so good.”

Le Guin talked to birds, and she wrote in response to the natural world, not just in response to humans. How many sci-fi writers have been doing that, asking what birds are doing to survive? How are ants surviving? Mice, squirrels, all these creatures that are proliferating are collaborative, collectivized creatures that do things in community with each other. How are they doing it?

How do we make that a viral experience? How do we nourish a viral experience of self-loving, and being in relationship with other people and living things who are learning how to love ourselves against all the odds? And what society becomes possible from that position? What are the loving corrections that make a loving society viable?

We’re so fortunate to have Le Guin’s writings, as they start us on a path of difficult questions and walk beside us to encourage us as we go. Read *The Dispossessed* as a love note, as an inspiration, as a specific set of

guidelines for how to be different.

Experiments in Honesty

Experimenting is important, and we don't give ourselves enough space to experiment right now. We expect that we can go from having a great idea to being able to live in that idea.

Transformative justice is a great example. I don't believe in the effectiveness of punitive systems, I don't believe in prisons; I believe in abolition. But I still have a hard time engaging in transformative justice practices, even with my best friends and family. I struggle with the first step, being honest when I am hurt, saying that I feel a boundary was crossed. Once I can get over that Everest, I can breathe, and we can process. And each time I try, I learn how to do it, how to be myself and in relationship, even if that sometimes means setting clearer boundaries.

I need to be in these experiments regularly to grow in my own capacity to practice things I want to see practiced on a mass scale. But I need to start on a small scale. For example, every four years we're like, "Let's fix the whole globe with an election!" But do you talk to your parents, do you talk to your family, to your neighbors? Do you bring the truth of your values to those people? I think if more people were to commit to initiating and sustaining more authentic conversations with family members, lovers, and friends we would be in a totally different situation in a year. This would include offering and receiving loving corrections.

No one is being honest. So that's the other thing—stop lying about things that matter. Lying happens in small ways, and it happens all of the time, yet none of us think we're liars. One habit I've noticed about myself is that sometimes when someone laughs, my instinct is to laugh too. One of my small practices is to ask myself, "Is it time to laugh?" I don't need to laugh because someone else is laughing; I can just appreciate their laughter. Another more insidious habit, perhaps: when someone who is racist is polite to me, my instinct is to be polite in response instead of to say, "That was racist."

Le Guin wielded her honesty with love and precision, in her letters to friends and in her corrective imaginary worlds. I am trying to figure out how to be more honest, at micro levels, and soften into more contradictions.

I don't think there are "right ways" to do this. My focus is building more capacity to hold more contradictions, within myself, my personal spheres, and my communities. I am increasing my mindfulness, so I can notice when I am out of alignment or out of integrity. Instead of judging myself, I can offer myself loving correction, looking thoroughly at what is driving my choices, where my own contradictions lie, and how I am holding my own complexity. Curiosity is a key aspect of loving correction—what would it look like to get back in integrity with myself?

If we can't tolerate the contradictions of our politics, we will always slip into reform. It appears to me that we are slowly dying of reform. We must push for that messy revolutionary stuff and hold the contradictions. Love is being radically honest and surviving.

For a while, in the years when I and so many people I knew were surviving sexual assault and harm, I was pro-incarceration, because there needed to be a place for monsters. That perspective shifted again as I came into relationship with people who had committed sexual assault, had grown and were still whole human beings and learning.

I learned more about what created the conditions for transformation at an individual level, from perpetrator of harm to responsible member of community, and at the community level, from maintaining secretive cultures that support harm and abuse, to evolving community engaged practices that allow us to relate to each other in the light. I became an abolitionist. We need to be able to hold a much wider container and be in the experiments and get messy.

And then submit to, "We don't know, but we still have to do the right thing."

On Gratitude, and Connections

It would be so easy to be depressed and dissociated, given the multiple crises we face. Turning back to Le Guin's work, turning back to Butler's work, turning back to these writers who are so formidable, I see instead that my work must become even more vigilant, more assertive with my vision for a radiant, collectivized, relational future.

One of the ideas of *The Dispossessed* is that relationships can be propertarian, and that this is the worst way to be in relationship—when we

think that we belong to someone, or that they belong to us. While this text is still too heteronormative for my taste, I really appreciate that individuals handle being in relationships that are not based on ownership, being each other's property. Le Guin's explorations around love and relationship, and the very acts of such imaginings, expand what's possible in our practices of connecting to each other. Some of the most interesting loving corrections I can conjure are reimaginings and liberations of how we structure our intimate relationships.

One of the major worlds in Le Guin's writing has come to be known as *The Hainish Cycle*, where Le Guin presents thrilling, frightening, and challenging alternatives to the Western tradition of heterosexual marriage, and the concept of static gender. It has always excited me to read these texts as fantasy sparked in the fertile ground of her home, to explore what it meant to be in a happy marriage while letting the imagination wander far into other formations of love and companionship.

Relatedly, in much of Ursula Le Guin's fiction, her lead characters are not white, but they are also not showily people of color. Their skin is just an aspect of their identity, among many others. In some cases, color indicates societal position, but mostly it's just geographical. I appreciated that Le Guin approached writing characters of color without pretending she could write the modern Black, Latino, Arab, Asian, or Indigenous experience. She didn't write pieces that were slightly sci-fi but set in current conditions, where she was overtly trying to climb inside a person of color's life.

I bristle when I see how white writers try to "work through" their white supremacy and racism on the page, writing caricatures shaped by the distance between their whiteness and authentic relationship to actual people of color. But Le Guin was disciplined in this way. Her work clearly flowed from the mind of someone who didn't think her skin made her superior, one of the loving corrections all white and lighter-skinned people can grow toward.

It helped me to know that there was a writer, a white woman, who could write diverse characters without erasing the pain of hierarchy and difference, and without denying the humanity of real communities of color. It meant that she could see a future that I could see. It meant another way was possible—not post-racial, but post-racist.¹² We could imagine it: Le Guin and I, as could so many of her readers.

I must show you what I tracked as I was deep diving into Le Guin's papers. I didn't intend to track it, but as I was reading things, I started to be a bit amazed that this married elder white woman from Oregon had a life that in so many strange ways overlapped with my own.

Dear readers, my final offering. I sent my final letter to Ursula on the evening of January 22, 2018, upon learning she had left her body:

dear Ursula, great teacher. great spirit.

i've been crying since i got the news of your passing, and also feeling very alive.

i got to live at the same time as you. and i get the honor of grieving you.

there are thoughts and ideas you wrote down that became beliefs for my whole life, marking posts on the journey of freeing myself.

there are questions you asked that changed the way i could think.

many of us don't get to experience grandparents who can accept us whole. for me, you were one of the adults who stepped into that yawning space, who joined the composite of my dream elder.

you let me know i may be in the wrong universe, but i am not wrong, i am not impossible.

you not only matched and fed my queer unorthodox mind but pushed me further. on relationships and sex alone.

you had me consider: what about four-way marriage? what about gender as a responsive switchy sexual state that was otherwise nonexistent? what about instead of a period you just had a monthly sexual overdrive and a special place to go orgy for that time?

i am a lucky one—i got to tell you to your face that you were everything—and you were gracious about it.

i am still creating a project about your work. in researching it i became fascinated by you, your abundant correspondence, your art and poetry connected to the worlds you created, your fierce letters to local editors about tree removals, your loves, and flirtations.

i still want to read everything. it feels impossible in the best way.

writers cast themselves out to the world with words, so that now you feel fully dispersed more than gone. you were so generous with your gifts. and you were rare—both prolific and genius. so many genius words!

the worlds you wrote increased my trust that white people could imagine something beyond their own supremacy. and that capitalism could be out imagined, like monarchy.

even when i did not seek you, you were there.

when i learned to meditate, you'd left me a framework.

when i fell in love with the Tao, i could turn to your translation.

when i wanted amazing fiction for all my nibblings, you had a series on flying cats.

when i needed to stand up for something, feeling alone in my dignity, you told me about the ones who walk away from a utopia dependent on someone else's suffering. when i lost hope in this world, you offered me a plethora of fully formed universes to learn from. you even gave me multiple options for moving between universes, both distant and parallel.

when some aspect of humanity felt beyond my comprehension or compassion, i found books you had written twenty years before that not only opened my heart, opened the possible in me, but generated desire for that specific difference.

when i wondered if imagination could be necessary for revolution and transformation, you said yes, you said our dreams and visions matter, they are the way we make oppression temporary.

88 years. i wanted more. you are that kind of human.

even as i sit in my grief for you, you guide me, you remind me that you are not absent, but complete.



10. “A Note of Solidarity,” NW Buzz, *Willamette Week*, March 17, 1999.

11. A core teaching in Generative Somatics, an organization training embodiment in social justice circles.

12. For more on developing a post-racist imagination, check out Janine de Novais, *Brave Community: Teaching for a Post-Racist Imagination* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2023).

Righting Racism: A Word for White People

What a Time to Be Alive

Right now, we are in a fast river together—every day there are changes that seemed unimaginable until they occurred.

If you are a white person (or a man) this is a time of intentionally relinquishing power, or having it pulled out from under you. I know it seems fast and everywhere, but it's not rapids, not a waterfall, not a tsunami. Most people who aren't white have, in our lineages or lived experiences, the whiplash of much more drastic changes that have been placed upon us by your ancestors. Imagine being snatched from home and shipped into slavery, weighed and measured, worked to death, lynched daily, reminded that our lives are expendable at any moment (and yes this is true even right now, hence #blacklivesmatter and #defundthepolice).

Or being displaced from the land we were given instructions to love and care for, then raped, killed, or reprogrammed.

Or being burned up by new weapons your ancestors created to speed colonization or domination. Being cast as the savages or terrorists in their worldview, in a way that stuck to us even outside the stage of their minds, your minds, such that it's nearly impossible for you to even see that lie without cultural ice buckets poured on the delusion.

Your ancestors did not fight fair, and they didn't teach you to be in right relationship with anyone. They didn't give our ancestors time to wonder, ask for help, course-correct, negotiate. This is why some say you should be grateful we seek justice, equality, and our humanity, versus revenge. Right now, after years of physical, intellectual, and cultural warfare on peoples who were different from white, different from you, you have an opportunity to leap forward, dive into this river of change, rather than be deluged and drowned in it.

The time for denial is over. You were not raised in a secret mountaintop retreat disconnected from the world, you haven't existed with no contact for more than four hundred years, so we know you see and know what is going on. And you're scared, saddened, defensive, guilty, and unsure of who to be if you aren't the superior by default, so you make choices toward or away from or against your own highest self.

When you ask, “But don’t all lives matter?” we hear, “I refuse to acknowledge the harm I have caused you by benefiting from false constructs of supremacy. I cannot prioritize your pain over my privilege.”

When you say, “Ok ok so teach me,” we hear, “My time and needs continue to be more important than yours. I refuse to research and read; I demand your labor.”

When you say, “But what do I do?” it sounds like procrastination, because we have told you a million things.

Here.

Here are ways I recommend diving into this river:

Learn to say, *and mean*, “I am sorry for the impact of my white supremacy.” Don’t just post it on the internet. Say it from your heart and gut directly to people you’ve impacted, especially in situations when you are or have been in positions of leadership and authority. And then—and this is important—shift your behavior so you never need to give that apology again. Riffing off fellow nerd Albert Einstein, practicing white supremacy and expecting an outcome other than race war is one definition of collective insanity. We don’t want an apology without the shifts in behavior, policy, and access to power, without the end of the monsoon of constant harm.

Commit to doing your own work without seeking accolades. Yes, some people of color will be welcoming, will even celebrate what you do. I am sometimes moved to tears when I hear how acts-of-white-people-being-kind-to-Black-people touch my Black southern father, who just never thought he would see that. Many people of color won’t clap because the point of this moment is decentering whiteness in the story of humanity, and that means not centering white course correction with the attention we give a baby’s first steps. We won’t patronize you for rejoining a collective path . . . and that should be good news.

Don’t revert to supremacy under pressure. It breaks trust. If you are told you are practicing white supremacy, consider that we see and feel things you do not because they’re weaponized against us, weighted against us, scarring us, limiting us. We aren’t generalizing or reducing you, we are protecting our vulnerable lives.

Redistribute resources. Not as charity, which is just another way to assuage the conscience of privilege. Redistribute money, leadership

positions, decision-making power, land, time in meetings, visionary space, relationships with philanthropy, speaking opportunities, press attention, health care benefits. If you can measure it, you can redistribute the resource.

I am taking the time to write to you because I am a mixed-race Black woman. I am connected to the same lineages of harm as you, even as I am harmed by them. I benefit from how the artifacts of whiteness in my skin, cadence, and cultural shaping make me more visible and comprehensible to you, more human to you. I am in intimate familial relationship with white people, and I want those relationships to be honest and accountable.

It's a devastating weight to carry, to work to be fully myself, humble, and brilliant, messy, and great, against a delusion of white supremacy so pervasive and invasive that it can grow within each of us without invitation. But just because something alive violates us does not mean we asked for it, does not mean we partner with it, believe it, or even let it live.

I, in my wholeness, am working to hold the contradictions of white supremacy responsibly, to weed my own garden even as I demand and build my and our Black power. We all have our work, and none of us can do anyone else's.

A Variation on Paying Attention to White People

In the spirit of "what you pay attention to grows," I want to bring more attention to the white people who are in my life, none by accident, none tolerated, each beloved and cultivated. Not everyone has an experience of white people who love, learn with, and follow them. I want to practice, in this moment, attending to them as much as or more than we attend to the swarm of karens and beckys and donalds and other haters.

I do not believe whiteness will just disappear in shame, or that white people committed to racism and other offenses to science and god will self-segregate in a way that leaves the rest of us and the planet safe. So I must believe that something else can emerge, is emerging, even if it is still small and rare. And my belief is met by the presence, felt much more than spoken, of white people who are blessings, peers, beloveds, comrades, self-responsible humans.

I am blessed by my mother. She gave up everything she'd been raised in, family and resources, when she realized she was in love with my father. She

began unlearning racism without training, decolonization curricula, language monitors. She began her unlearning in relationship, as a wife and as a mother. She was the one who came storming into classrooms challenging her children's racist teachers. She has taken our sides and has our backs and asserts our brilliance at every turn. She doesn't claim to get it right, but she keeps leaning in, and learning with love. She makes me consider that something *can* shift deep within when you birth a Black child, or three. I am not interested in denying that, ridiculing that, making it smaller than what it is.

I am blessed by those in my southern white family who reach out to let me know they love me and listen hungrily to suggestions for what they can do to be in solidarity, to teach their kids to see beyond the racism they're all raised to swim in. They help offset the pain of knowing there are white people related to me by blood who watched me be a Black child, and then chose to vote for the Klan's favorite president.

I am blessed by the antiracist white people in my inner friend circle. Instead of perfection, these friends are committed to practice, to asking questions, and really listening to the answers, to doing their own work and not putting it on me, to releasing rigid control, and seeing that there are many ways to be productive and efficient, to growing ease in taking leadership from Black people, from people of color. And then diving in deep with other white people. And decentering themselves in their fields. And fucking up, and then letting it grow them rather than make them performative or bitter. They do most of their race work elsewhere, and yet it is palpable to me without feeling like guilt, charity, pity, or other power-over emotions.

I have had a white partner in the past, and though I revel and thrive in Black love currently, when I look at movements for change, I see many leaders with white partners, white family, white community. Sometimes they are claimed, sometimes they are quietly kept off screen. We need to bring more attention to why those people get to be in our lives, why any white person gets the privilege of being in intimate space with those who have experienced enough ancestral harm from white people to stay away forever.

There are shifts of labor in these relationships, from the nonwhite labor of internalizing and burying the impact of white supremacy, to the white labor

of reducing the material and cultural impacts of white supremacy; from the nonwhite labor of extending trust where it has been systemically broken, to the white labor of moving beyond good intentions to concerted and consistent attention and effort. We need to attend not in a carrot/stick way, not in ways that deny your humanity, or cheerlead what you are already just supposed to do, but simply acknowledge that it *is* work.

It isn't a shift at the level of slogan, political correctness, or press release, though those cultural quakes do soften the soil for new organic infrastructures of antiracist life to take root. It is deeply personal work to relinquish white supremacy, and it helps me if I remember that the white people in my life are not exceptional but just a few steps ahead in their work.

Think of those confederate monuments coming down. All my roots are southern, so those statues seemed like they'd always been there and always would be. And then slowly there came a mainstream realization that they were celebrating the worst of humanity, the plantation hitlers, that that's what white supremacy is about. Now it feels inevitable that we are pulling down the symbols, as inside everyone's minds, we are pulling down the ideas of racial supremacy.

But then there's the gap, the statue's empty base, the place where that idea once seemed right. Now there's just the wound, the world shaped around the absence of a clear way of being.

I recently purchased the bust of a Black man, head full of amethyst, from Damon Davis; and last year I visited the National Museum for Peace and Justice, which is full of statues to honor those murdered by lynching across the United States south. All of these works are perfect, and I wish they were everywhere. I am tempted to make a case for replacing the statues with Black heroes and martyrs, but I can also see the case for no replacement statues, not in our town squares or in our minds.

We live in a beautiful, interconnected world that needs our attention. Maybe if we drop the performance of celebrating difference, we can make it possible to survive difference.

It must be possible. We must make it possible, or else we will always be in a position of demand, or counterpolicing, or rage. I want us to use this current justified rage to shape demands that take the labor and danger off us. I want to liberate our grandchildren from those taut, hurt, and angry

lives.

At the same time, I want us to contend for power, and notice who truly invites that power. That is the common trait of every white person, every person I allow into my life in a meaningful way. There is a mutual invitation: both of us in our power and truest selves are invited into every space.

So for the white people walking this path with me, thank y'all for keeping me faithful when a mass perspective on whiteness still feels pretty hopeless. Thank you for being willing to be visible or not. Thank you for not waiting for praise as you unlearn the supremacy you were programmed to practice, and for not reacting personally to the righteous rage and shifting boundaries required to move through this collective transition. Thank you for offering support, instead of demanding more labor.

Mary Hooks, of *Southerners on New Ground*, articulated a mandate for Black people in this time: "To avenge the suffering of our ancestors, to earn the respect of future generations, and be willing to be transformed in the service of the work."¹³

The white people in my life must align with that mandate—put your lifetime in service of undoing the work of your ancestors, earning the respect of future generations, and being willing to be transformed in the service of the work.

Addendum for the Jewish Community, Especially Those with European Lineage

I know some of my comrades can turn off their empathy for colonizers, oppressors, harmdoers, racists, abusers, and others who use their humanity for domination. Or maybe it is different than turning it off, maybe empathy is just not available while the wounds are still oozing. As a mixed-race person with whiteness as part of my lineage, I feel it is my work in this lifetime not to close my heart to the processes of whiteness, white families, white peoples, even—especially—when they are causing great harm. As a person who grew up in Germany and later learned I had German ancestry, I feel it is in my life's work to be in right relationship with my Jewish family, especially those of Ashkenazi heritage. Only by allowing myself to stay in touch with their humanity can I find some hope for the species surviving

white supremacy.

Wanting Jewish people to be safe from persecution is part of the path toward peace and justice in the world. One piece of this work is to ensure that Jewish people of all backgrounds feel and are safe everywhere on earth, along with the rest of us. Another piece is to know that an apartheid state like Israel, which is presented as the only safe home for Jewish people, is never actually safe, for anyone; it will never be a path toward peace. Zionism aligns directly with white supremacy, but because the people leading Zionist efforts claim to be doing this for Jewish safety, and Jews have faced such devastating and traumatic erasure and genocide throughout their history, including at the hands of white supremacists, some have felt it is complicated to find a clear stance.

As an American, I am obliged to keep learning, trace the contours of this struggle, and to use my standing as a US citizen to show up well and on the side of sovereignty, to decolonize this place that has such a massive impact on Palestine, and the rest of the globe. I am obliged to recognize that Israel and the United States are cut from the same colonial and contradictory cloth. Since 1948, Palestine has been systematically colonized by Israel as a Zionist project cocreated with and backed by Western interests. Israel has become an outpost of the United States, through which the US can protect its interests in the region.

And as a Black American, I believe Jewish people should embrace anti-Zionism in the same ways that some white people in the US have embraced antiracism. After all, in the same way white people in the US have to be socialized into supremacy thinking, the Jewish communities who see Israel as their promised land, and themselves as chosen above others to have the historical right to take that land out from those currently living there, are socialized into these beliefs from birth. They have been colonized, along with those who are not Jewish but buy into the idea that Israel is the path to Jewish safety. The work of this generation is steady, uncompromising decolonization, everywhere it is needed, including in this traumatic, wounded nation-state, and in the US, Israel's staunchest ally.

For guidance, I look to anti-Zionist Jewish leaders who are aligned with the work of antiracist white people, and who reject the oppressive systems that distort and destroy humanity. I would also point my Jewish readers to Jewish Voice for Peace and Arab Resource and Organizing Center as places

to begin decolonization. Narratives that suggest that one people can be free (or safe) only if another people die (or are oppressed) yield more violence and trauma, and are inherently supremacist. They serve those with the power to unilaterally oppress, imprison, and kill.

And sadly, there are currently more genocidal campaigns unfolding in the world than I can count on one hand, as well as other unjust wars, conflicts, and normalized violence. I have been able to read about unfolding genocides in the Congo and Sudan, in Myanmar, and the fully displaced Armenian people. There are also ongoing terrors unfolding in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Haiti, Yemen, and Syria. There are places so cut off from any kind of communication that we do not know the extent of the abuses and crimes unfolding within.

What keeps me grounded is learning about ongoing repression all over the world, constantly, and seeking patterns of resistance. I am learning all the time to “transform myself to transform the world,” as Grace Lee Boggs taught us. What keeps me grounded is accepting that I cannot do everything, but if I let my rage, grief, and inspiration move me, and we each show up where we are most enraged, grieved, and inspired, we might end up having enough solidarity to transform the patterns that flow through all injustice. Some of you may find that one of those other campaigns is the best long-term place for your solidarity work. I am excited about groups like Rising Majority, Grassroots International, and Grassroots Global Justice who work on a regular basis to help us connect these struggles.

What keeps me grounded is seeing how vast the movement for Palestine is in this moment and knowing that *anytime* people are facing apartheid and genocide they need this level of solidarity, and more. They especially need to see this level of pressure and noise. We need to stop doing business as usual with the people and corporations collaborating with their oppressor.

What keeps me grounded is that I have never come across a politic or historical trauma that justified the genocide of an oppressed people. I know we are right to stand against occupation and genocide wherever we see it. I am a survivor among survivors, and we will end this cycle.

13. “The Mandate: A Call and Response from Black Lives Matter Atlanta,” Southerners on New Ground website, July 14, 2016, <https://southernersonnewground.org/themandate>.

Righting Family: Sisters Checking In, An Interview with adrienne, April, and Autumn

Interview by Jill Petty

Several years ago, the Brown sisters—adrienne maree (the eldest), April (the middle child), and Autumn (the baby)—devised their own loving correction. Intended as an intervention to reduce and tackle the inevitable friction and disagreements that routinely surfaced between them during larger family visits, the check-ins have endured for nearly fifteen years.

In the conversation below, the sisters recall the start of their regular check-ins, and discuss how accountability and conflict were managed in their family as they grew up. They also reflect on how their mindfulness about these issues has evolved over time, and how it has changed their relationships with each other, as well as with other family members, partners, and friends.

April and Autumn were interviewed along with adrienne by me—Jill Petty, the supporting editor of the Emergent Strategy series (also the eldest of three sisters). April lives and works in Virginia with her husband and two dogs, is interested in marathons and romance novels, and is the family introvert. Autumn lives in Minnesota with her three children, is interested in aikido and making music, and as April put it, has a sign on her face that says “extrovert.” adrienne lives and writes in North Carolina, loves swimming and playing games, and is on the cusp—an ambivert. The sisters see each other about three or four times a year, but speak on the phone regularly.

Introductions (and Teasing)

Autumn: Oh my gosh. I’m so excited about this conversation. Do we remember who suggested sister check-ins?

amb: I suggested it.

Autumn: You’re gonna take credit? Are you sure? [shared laughter]

amb: Well, I’m pretty sure! I remember it being like . . .

Autumn: That we needed an intervention. But wait, we need to wait until April is on the call.

amb: Oh yeah, April will help us.

Jill: April just joined.

April: Is that . . . are you driving?

Jill: She is.

amb: I am driving. I'm gonna be home in about seventeen minutes now.

April: That feels like an unsafe life choice. [laughter]

amb: Jill, welcome to my sister, April.

April: Nice to meet you. [laughter]

Jill: Pleasure. I was just saying to your sis, we can wait till she's home.

April: Right. But this feels like a very adrienne moment though.

amb: I am so excited for you guys to meet Jill. She is so amazing. She's been with us a year now, Jill. Is that right? I am so blessed to work with you, Jill. I'm so happy we're in each other's lives.

Autumn: Awwwwwww!

Jill: Oh adrienne! Thank you. It does feel like kismet. We were meant to work together.

Autumn: That's so awesome.

Jill: What a gift. And I'm getting to meet your sisters! Now, full confession . . . I also have two younger sisters!

April: Oh, wow. Another older sister! [laughter]

Autumn: You're the adrienne in the dynamic.

Jill: I'm the adrienne in the dynamic, so I'm watching all of this right now with a lot of interest.

April: You're like, huh, that looks familiar!

amb: Yeah, but I have to say, I don't feel like a very typical oldest sister, but we'll see how it unfolds in the interview!

April: That's so shocking. [laughter]

Autumn: We'll see what gets revealed.

April: Well, adrienne is right. People always think that she's our youngest sister. When they interact with the three of us together, people always assume she's the baby of the family. I think it's because she still walks around with wonder in the universe in her eyes and the way she interacts with other humans. Whereas I'm like, did you see what those people were up to? And then Autumn's like, well, no, I actually, now I can actually see the wonder in them too. And I'm like, I'm still skeptical.

Autumn: Right.

April: So, we're each at different spots on that scale, that arc. [laughter]

amb: The arc of wonder. [more laughter]

April: And I know middle children are sometimes called easygoing or diplomatic, because sometimes they have to be, but I would not describe myself as the easygoing one.

amb: That's accurate.

Autumn: There is no fact that is truer than that fact.

amb: But you're the nicest to strangers, I would say. April, you're the nicest to strangers!

Autumn: Yeah. That's right. You're the nicest, you're the nicest of the three of us, I think.

amb: Yeah. I agree.

April: But that's just politeness, and some people always mistake politeness for niceness, and maybe even for being easygoing! [laughter]

Jill: For real. The middle sister in our family would agree with you.

April: But I have to correct people about this all the time. At work, everywhere. People will say, "You're so nice! I don't know how you're so nice to people all the time." And I'm like, I'm not nice. [laughter] I'm polite! But you know, people are not used to politeness, especially nowadays.

amb: Yeah. I definitely think this is true.

Autumn: It's kind of like a lost art form! It really is. People don't make the effort, maybe because they don't even know how to. But I think April is also like the most sensitive of the three of us, you know? And I mean, we are all highly sensitive people . . . !

Jill: That's right. Of course!

Autumn: But the way we express our sensitivity, I think, is really different. April can hear a painful story about someone's life, and immediately start crying in response to the information. She has high, high empathy. But she's also the most—you all can tell me if I'm wrong about this, April—she is the most truly introverted of the three of us. adrienne IDs as an introvert, but she is really more of . . .

amb: I'm a little both/and.

Autumn: Yep, you're more of an ambivert. And it's true. I am a true extrovert. And April's a true introvert.

April: Autumn's literally wearing a sign on her face that says extrovert everywhere she goes. [laughter]

Autumn: That's like, interact with me! I swear that adrienne has a T-shirt that says, "I'm an introvert, would you like to have lunch?" [laughter]

amb: No, that part is not true—I hate having lunch!

April: And if I'm inside my house and someone rings the doorbell, I'm looking through the blind like, "Can they tell that I'm home?"

Jill: Oh my god, Brown sisters. This is gold. This is gold! [laughter] But can you say more about this? Especially how your personalities shape your responses to conflict outside—and inside—of the family? One sister is highly extroverted, another sister is on the cusp, right? And another sister is introverted. How do these differences play out in terms of how you manage conflict, and how easy it is for you to offer and receive feedback?

amb: It's actually been kind of amazing. I feel like the way that April manages conflict is through using orderly structures and systems to handle things. And it's one of the reasons I think you've been drawn to more structured work. On my end, I feel like I've been driven by my desire to want everyone to like me. So even when there is a system in place, I sometimes struggle to use it. I'm really great at holding other people's conflict. If I'm not involved in it, that's my favorite place. I've been really trying to unlearn my people-pleaser stuff.

And then I feel like Autumn is like the most willing to go kind of into direct engagement. Like she will say, what the fuck did you just say? Like, did you say something to my child?

April: Autumn will correct someone in a moment.

amb: And when we were growing up, as the oldest, I felt that I had to "behave." That's my number one mission in life. I might have to sneak around if I'm gonna do something that's not good, but I have to really be seen by my parents as behaving. But April was very attuned to what's fair and not fair. She would throw an uprising if something wasn't fair. And then like . . .

Autumn: Literal uprising.

Jill: Oh, April was the kid with the justice gene! [laughter]

amb: Right. And then Autumn would be like, I don't care what you all think. Here's how I'm doing it.

April: Also, here's the truth. Autumn is not the liar in the family.

Autumn: Yeah, I'm not. [laughter] It's actually, it's so interesting you say that, April. What I'm about to say is less about our family, but more about

how I think about conflict. And because I think that how you move in conflict has a lot to do with how easily you can withhold information. Right?

April: Oh yes.

Autumn: And we all have different capacities for withholding. Well, and withholding maybe makes it automatically sound negative, I don't necessarily mean it that way, but like . . .

April: How do you boundary it?

Autumn: We each have different capacities for how much we can hold things close to our chest, I think. And I'm a very, very honest, direct person.

amb: No poker face.

Jill: No poker face! Yes!

Autumn: And this is something I like and love about myself! But over the years, I've also come to understand that just because I know the truth doesn't mean I have to speak the truth. And sometimes there's an enormous benefit to me if I can actually hold things closer to my chest. I think a lot of my emotional maturing has happened in relationship to understanding that there were ways that my truth telling could cause harm. And that it was like, I can be free spirited, but that doesn't mean that I have to be unfeeling.

amb: Mmhmm!

Jill: That's right. Even if you are by nature a truth teller, sometimes you have to figure out ways to be in integrity *and* hold things.

Childhood Memories about Conflict and Resolution

amb: Some things were modeled for us. For example, we grew up in a household where our parents kept conflicts pretty private, or at least they tried to. We could feel it, you know, or we could see it. Sometimes it would kind of blow, but most of the time, fighting wasn't a loud, expressive thing that happened.

And there was some sense of social safety in that. Although the way things played out . . . We were also kids who were spanked.

April: We can have different memories related to it too, because of our differences in age.

amb: Yes, and how much was shown and revealed to us as we got older, and as our parents and elders were getting older. But I do remember being

around people who were fighting loudly and openly, and feeling like WHOA . . .

April: Yeah. I remember that feeling too.

amb: Like, adults do that? Because of that norm in our house and my own personality, as I've gotten older, sometimes I feel like I will share things with the world before I will actually share them with another person. I've had to actually learn how to have interpersonal conflict, instead of being, like, I'm gonna write a book about this.

Jill: Right! Not that this is a bad thing! [laughter]

amb: No, it's not! But that was my go to. I'm gonna write a blog about this, right? Then maybe the person that needs to see it will see it. Instead of learning to talk to the person in real time and say, "You hurt my feelings" or "Something you just did or said was really offensive."

April: That's so true. Autumn and I are closer in age; we're twenty months apart. adrienne and I are three and a half years apart. You learn different things based on what you're observing at different ages, as well as your personality, and how you interpret things! Even now, as we're all in our forties, or about to be. We all have slightly different perspectives of our growing up years, even though there are certain impressions that seem very consistent because we all experienced this unique and very insular family model that our parents created for us. But then because we had different personalities in that space, we also have very different memories. We had this come up a couple of years ago, when Autumn's kids were moving from one school to another. And she reached out to talk about our time moving into schools in Atlanta, because she's trying to anticipate things in this environment. It was so fascinating, because I was like, "Oh Atlanta was a super traumatizing experience for me, and I don't even want to talk about it." Even as an adult, I did not want to talk about it.

Autumn was shocked that I don't even fly through the Atlanta airport; I don't want to ever go back to Georgia again. And neither of them had any clue. All of us remember our time there completely differently, because we were having such unique experiences based on who we were and how our parents related to us during that time.

Autumn: We were in three different schools during our time there, so we didn't directly observe each other's experiences.

April: That was a very significant time. One thing about our parents was

that they were super strict, but even their strictness showed up in different ways for each of us. Compared to adrienne and me, Autumn never got into trouble for anything.

Autumn: I didn't really, but I was just such a good child.

April: She was such a good child because she was so honest. She really was a really good child.

Autumn: I was a really easy kid, even all through high school. I didn't go through a rebellious phase, so our parents never really had to consequence me in the way that you would typically consequence a teenager. I was just revisiting this while I was in DC visiting April two weeks ago, and I went to my old high school. And I was reliving that version of myself. I had this whole attitude, like, my body is an instrument; I'm gonna be a famous actress or a performer. I'm not doing any of the things that my peers are up to really . . .

April: We didn't do any of that stuff. [laughter]

Autumn: . . . because that's not a part of my path. So I just really didn't get into certain things. Our parents understood that I was honest to a fault, in the sense that I couldn't really hide anything from them. So, they just knew that they didn't have to worry about me doing something and hiding it, because I would never hide anything.

April: That was not the case for me.

Autumn: Mom often says now, "There are things that I really wish that you didn't tell me back then. I didn't need to know all the things that you told me." [laughter] I have three children, and my oldest is like me.

Jill: Yeah, I was a bit like you in our family system, Autumn. I would not tell a lie. And my younger sisters still crack up about it. They're like thank goodness you cleared the way for us! I would not sneak around, but I would have fights with my parents, like, fighting for the right to party, or whatever the hell I was fighting for. [laughter]

April: adrienne was also fighting for her right to party. But adrienne would do it in such an adrienne way! [laughter] She was the kind of person who'd be like, you're not gonna let me do that thing? Okay, I'm going to document everything that you're not letting me do so that when I'm able to choose to do it on my own, I will know all the things that I want to do. Right?

amb: I had a list of all the movies I wasn't allowed to watch. [laughter]

April: All the movies they wouldn't let us watch because our parents were really strict. I think the most scandalous movie we saw as teenagers was *Titanic*. And we saw *Jurassic Park* in theaters, and it was probably the most violent movie we saw together as a family.

Jill: Your parents were very strict, yes?

Autumn: Absolutely. But another thing I've been reflecting on since my DC trip, when I was visiting with April, her husband, and the dogs a couple of weeks ago: they have one of the most functional marriages I've ever witnessed!

amb: Yeah. This is absolutely true.

Autumn: And it's really been sitting with me, April, ever since!

April: Ooooh.

Jill: That is so lovely, and such high praise.

Autumn: I saw how much peace you have with each other. I just wanted to put that in the ether . . .

April: The dogs. It was all about the dogs. I intuited that my partner needed a dog, and over time, we talked about it, and we did it. He's so much happier, and it's made our family life warmer too.

Autumn: You tuned into his needs, and this resulted in your family shaping out in that way. Because we're talking about conflict resolution and offering loving corrections—April has a lot of wisdom to share about that. We've all been in lots of different kinds of relationships, but of the people in this conversation, April has had the most long-lasting and successful, committed relationship that's not defined by conflict.¹⁴ I was married for sixteen years, but my marriage was so defined by constant conflict.

The Origins of the Sister Check-In

amb: This also makes me think about the ways that conflict was discouraged in our family. It was unclear, sometimes, how to have conflict while we were growing up, and it was discouraged. The message was, get to peace, go to bed, figure it out.

And especially as we got older, we realized that there's not a guidebook or something on how to have healthy relationships with adult siblings, or how to be an adult family, and deal with conflict. So, we kept having the experience of coming together for family vacations and blowing up at each

other on the second or third day.

April: Always. Like clockwork.

amb: We would land, and we were all so excited because our family is big on anticipation. We definitely have an anticipation value. We really like to look forward to things as a family.

But then we would get together, and it would explode. And it would just be like, dang! It was so disappointing, because we all felt like we just wanted things to go so well! There was always the huge gap between what we had in mind for our time together versus what actually went down. Mostly because we didn't know what was going on with each other.

Jill: I understand this. Not knowing what's up for each other, and dealing with so much pressure for things to go right when you don't get together all the time . . .

amb: Absolutely. So much of the conflict we were in was because we were overwhelmed or dealing with stuff that had nothing to do with the family. But we were coming into a space needing to be sensitively held or needing to be considered. Or we were just exhausted and not able to read each other's minds and trying to keep up the "no conflict zone."

Autumn: And the conflict style in our family, particularly between the three of us and our mom, was if something gets hot, we talk it all the way down to the ground. No one is allowed to go to bed angry.

April: Ever.

Jill: That's so striking and admirable. But it also sounds like it might be taxing.

Autumn: There was a real sense of time scarcity in our family. Like, you don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow, and we don't know so we have to . . .

April: Everything has to be resolved.

amb: I love you. Always say "I love you." You never know.

Autumn: Yeah, exactly. You always have to say "I love you." For me, there's so much beauty in this insistence on resolution. But there's also a lot of distortion in it. And so in my household, the default setting for us is like, if things feel super-heated, take space.

Jill: Take space.

Autumn: Absolutely, take space.

Jill: That is such an intentional and loving correction, for your family.

amb: I'm so happy to fucking be here, you know.

April: I love you!

amb: I love you so much.

April: I love you more! [laughter]

amb: So, before the regular check-ins, after the explosion would happen, sometimes we'd have the conversations we needed to have. And especially if the three of us could sit down and have a conversation, it felt amazing. So then the idea was like, what if we just did this on the front end? What if we landed with each other and it was like . . . At first it was very timed. It was structured.

April: Very structured! I remember.

amb: At first, it was thirty minutes. Sometimes we still do it this way if we have a limited time, but it was just like, everyone just gets thirty minutes. Just download what's going on with you so we know the things that don't come through in text and when you're far away. Then during the pandemic, we started doing a weekly family call, where all five of us would get on, all the adults, and then when Autumn's kids were around, they would hop on as well. The sister check-in predated that, and was like, just when we get together, let's start doing this.

April: We've been doing the sister check-in for thirteen years? Fourteen years? Because when I made the decision to go work for the federal government, I think it was really hard for adrienne, most of all. I think sometimes it's still hard! But at the time it was really, really hard, and I think adrienne took it kind of personally. She was like, you're making this choice intentionally. You know, she was with the League of Young Voters.

amb: And I had tried to get April nonprofit or social justice jobs . . .

April: To go that path, yeah. And I couldn't get a job! [laughter]

amb: Well, what I learned during that time was that social justice movements can be very closed off to people who are new.

April: Very much so.

amb: So, I saw my sister as someone who was interested in this work, but she couldn't find a job. And then she ended up going a different route, and I was grieving . . .

April: Yeah. Work for the government? I would say between the three of us, I think mine and adrienne's relationship at that time was probably the hardest.

amb: Mmhmm. I agree.

April: And that played out in our sister dynamic, and it played out in our larger family dynamic. What ended up happening is I went out to visit adrienne in Oakland for a long weekend, and we had a very honest conversation. But we'd gone into the weekend like, we're either gonna choose to have an adult sister relationship or we are going to choose to not have an adult sister relationship; this will be the outcome of this visit.

Jill: The stakes were high.

April: Yes. And we needed to have a serious and honest conversation with each other about the trajectory of our relationship, and what was really going on underneath the surface. One of the things I realized then is that I'm a very sensitive person, and it's easy for me to get into my own head. I think it's easy for anyone to get into their own head! And so adrienne and Autumn sometimes do very similar work, and as the sister who doesn't do that it's easy to see them off living their best life. And I'm like, no one cares about the middle sister. And so, you know . . .

amb: And she's a Pisces.

April: And I'm a Pisces, which is more significant for adrienne and Autumn than I really understand, but like it is serious. [laughter]

Jill: Yes, I get it! That *is* meaningful, April. [laughter]

April: You know, now these kinds of conversations have names. I just read the book *Radical Candor* a couple of months ago, and what we were doing was radical candor, wasn't it? But then there was no name for these conversations. I think the tipping point for us was realizing that we would keep playing out the same pattern and fall into all these same roles unless we make a big change . . .

amb: Yeah. This happened all of the time.

April: And it shifted when the three of us chose to have adult relationships with each other, and to do more intentional work together. adrienne would put a timer on her phone and we would each commit to talk about three topics that were going on in our lives. And we would each run through the three things that were most important for the others to know coming into the visit, whether it was something significant and positive, significant and negative, or something that was just on our minds and stressing us out. It completely changed the trajectory of how we were able to be together—the three of us—but also the three of us with our parents.

amb: Yeah. That's right.

April: Our parents really want all of us to be together, happily. And at first, I saw them struggling with giving us the space to be the three of us together; they wanted to be the ones to help us resolve the conflicts, but it was really important for us to carve out that ability to achieve solutions as adults. It's not like we never argue now; we still have moments! But more often than not when they happen it's because we haven't had a check-in, or we've gone significant amounts of time without communicating about something, or one of us has something going on in our lives that we haven't actually told the others about and that's under the surface. And then we say okay, we need to have a check-in.

amb: And we'll just say that, it sounds like we need a check-in. As soon as the pattern starts. If I start to feel like I'm taking a lot of things personally and I feel under attack, or I'm wondering if I'm doing something wrong, there's a shape that comes in. And so now I've learned to recognize that shape, step outside of it, and say "we need to check in."

Jill: You can see the shift sooner now and are less triggered by it. Because you have a container for it.

amb: Absolutely. The pandemic period has been tough, and it overlapped with when Autumn's divorce process started, about four years ago. This period of our lives has been about hardcore adulting, hardcore grief, hardcore loss, hardcore change. There's a lot of times when we come to the check-in, and honestly, any one of us could fill the whole space with all the stuff we're holding.

There's also the discipline of "here's the essential pieces that you need to know." It also shifts, I think, how we feel day to day. Cause I think there starts to be an awareness that you're living a whole life that is probably pretty overwhelming. It takes someone who cares for you to ask, "How are you doing?"

April: Yeah. This is absolutely true.

Jill: You're building empathy, and trust. And in such an intentional way. How supportive because of things going on in the family, and all the bullshit we are dealing with out in the world.

Autumn: Mmhmm. That's right.

amb: Exactly. It's also so cool to remember this. I had totally forgotten about that Oakland trip, but if we didn't have the Oakland trip, we would

have never had the Hawaii trip.

April and Jill: Yes!

amb: And, by the Hawaii trip, we were doing so good that we were able to get tattoos. This was three or four years later.

Jill: I'm reading more and more about family estrangement being on the rise; articles about increased estrangement between parents and kids, estrangement between siblings. Sometimes it's implied that a lot of this is about Trump and co., and how they have surfaced major differences about values and politics between family members. So it's really striking to me that you did something years ago to build your relationship as adult siblings, and it's still holding.

amb: Yeah. For sure.

Autumn: Yeah.

April: And holding space is important. And intention is important.

amb: You guys matter. You know, I think about this regularly, whenever we have these check-ins, and it's so good. I want to name that before we started our check-ins, or maybe it was in the very early days, there was a sister-supported process for me as I came out. I was never closeted necessarily, but I was recognizing how queer and pan and everything else I was, and being open about it. And remember that our lineage is evangelical Christian, Bible folks! [laughter] Almost everyone else has stayed locally and has lived their life pretty much in one place. We are the ones who've gotten to go out and travel and just have these very different lives and be exposed to a lot of different things, which I think is valuable.

So, there was a period with my grandparents where they were really not down for queer adrienne vibes. And I wasn't welcome to see them, or to bring a partner. And my sisters were like, we won't go either. They had my back, and flanked my sides.

Jill: Oh yeah. I'm *not* surprised that they heard it from April and Autumn.

amb: You know, that was so important to me. It changes everything in a family dynamic if one person can be "isolated out" for who they are. It's so powerful if anyone else in the family says "No, I will not let that person be isolated out for that. I'm gonna stand with them. So, if you're willing to give them up, you're gonna give up more than just them, you're not gonna get to see grandkids and great-grandkids." And they saw that they were missing out on *a lot*.

Autumn: It was deep. April and I both wrote letters. I wrote a letter to my grandmother, and I said I'm not bringing my children to your house until adrienne is welcome there. My kids were young at the time, like four and two.

amb: They'd never met the youngest, and they'd only met the oldest once.

Autumn: Yeah, they'd only met once. So, I was sad, but I was so clear. I'm just not, I'm just not, *I'm just not*.

April: I feel like it was right after I finished graduate school?

Autumn: It was!

April: It was not a tough decision to make, but it was one of the toughest experiences because I had just come out of two years of living in South Carolina, an hour away from my grandparents and spending every weekend with them.

amb: Yeah.

Jill: Oh wow.

April: And I don't know if they wrote you back, Autumn, but they wrote me back, and they were like, "We love adrienne, this isn't a question about whether we love adrienne or not." I said, "This is a thing that we've learned in our family—your actions show how you love people."

amb: Yes, yes, yes! And I think we bring in a value that is distinct inside of our family. And it's like, you're missing out on this really dynamic energy that we're bringing in, and it's all love, you know, we show up, and we're showing up with a lot of love. We also know how to be with each other, have different opinions and different life practices, and we can still hold each other down, and just be family.

Jill: This is such a loving correction, in all of the ways! I want to ask Autumn about that period where adrienne and April had this meet-up with all serious intentions, right? What was it like for you, Autumn?

Autumn: I have no memory of that.

April: Yeah, I'm not surprised at that Autumn. When we're talking about events that far back in your life, I feel like our younger years might seem more like glimpses. Like, we really didn't connect unless we were all together as a family

Autumn: April, you and I had also been in our own kind of challenging dynamic, in that same span of time I think. And it started to really shift

when I became a mom. But April and I were only a year apart, so we were pretty tight in high school, and we had a lot of overlap in our friend group. We spent a lot of time together and then we both went off to college and we both went off to very, very different schools. Very different environments. I went off to like a very elitist space . . .

April: I went to the cornfields of Iowa. [laughs]

Autumn: April went to the cornfields of Iowa, and I went off to, like, the most expensive school in the country at the time.

April: So, both my sisters were in New York, and I was in Iowa, right? I would say that's where this dynamic of feeling left out really first started.

Autumn: Yeah. I feel that for April and me, it was almost like our one-to-one dynamic . . . it was like it went offline or something! And there was a heavy moment one year when we were all in college at the same time, and I elected not to come home for Christmas. The year that I studied abroad in England, I elected to not come home for Christmas so that my boyfriend—who became my (now ex) husband—could come to me, and we could spend that winter break together in England. And it was hard for everyone in the family. No one was happy about that decision, but April was the one who was the most . . .

April: Vocal. [laughter]

Autumn: When I saw her again the following summer, we had a fight about it. April sat me down and explained to me what a huge mistake it was that I had made.

April: I don't remember that conversation at all.

Autumn: You don't remember that?

April: No. But I think it's an interesting thing because it also gets to the difference in each of your lives, right? Like, when the traditions start to crack. And then you start to create your new traditions as your own individual adult. And I was the last to crack from family traditions. I feel like I was the holdover in a lot of ways, being like, we're all supposed to be here, we're all supposed to be there.

amb: You think so?

April: Yeah, I feel like I was like the last one . . .

amb: I think I'm the last one!

April: I mean, you come for Christmas, but I would say that I remember you were always off somewhere, right?

amb: That's fascinating. I have a totally different take. I feel like I'm always asking, what are we doing for the holidays? What are we doing for Christmas? What are we doing?

April: Yes, adrienne comes back to that traditional space. And Autumn and I have really been more like our lives don't function that way right now.

amb: Cause you have families, yeah.

April: Well, I associated so much of our years of fighting around holidays, because that's when we'd all gather. So, I'd rather see you off holiday, you know?

Jill: Everybody has said the check-ins have changed the way that the family engages with you, and also maybe engages around conflict, in the family, among the five and maybe beyond the five, right? Can you speak to that a little bit?

amb: Well, I would say one thing, and I'll keep this brief, because I really want to hear what my sisters have to say on this. I will say one thing that feels really helpful about it is that it's helping us support our parents. They're not old, but they're older. They're aging. And because we have the sister check-in process, I feel like we've come together around a shared sense of responsibility, about making sure our parents are okay. And understanding what's happening with them, as they shift and change. And just making sure they're doing okay.

Jill: Of course. You have more bandwidth to do it with less conflict too.

amb: I do feel like the three of us actively supported them into retirement, supported them through a big move, and landing it. They've moved back down south, and they're in deeper contact with family. And so far, they are really thriving, both of them, thriving. I would say that in some ways, for me that felt like it was almost a five- or six-year sister project.

We aligned around it and had conversations about our capacities for supporting. What can we do that can really help them? What are we all hearing from them? And it was so important to be united around the fact that it was time for them to retire. We come from a family where there's a real sense of financial responsibility, particularly on my dad for making sure everyone's okay . . .

Autumn: And not just our immediate family, but *his* extended family.

amb: Yes, Dad feels responsible for making sure everyone is supported. So, there was a big desire for us to let our parents know, hey, we're good.

Don't keep working on our behalf, y'all! You seem ready to retire.

We also helped them have conversations with each other—y'all need to talk about this together! And just feeling like collectively we can handle this, you know? It creates a dynamic in the family that says “Yes, we talk about stuff. We talk about stuff.”

Jill: It sounds like your practice created a lot more spaciousness for you to support them.

amb: Yeah. We needed the room.

Autumn: And we really did support our parents through such a major transition, and I think we truly did do it in a coordinated way.

amb: We've also discussed our health concerns with each other. I'm finally, this year, in a real process of looking disordered eating directly in the face. It's been a process with my sisters, where I come back to the table over and over again and admit that I don't always understand what's happening with my health.

And it helps so much to come back to people who grew up in the same conditions. They help me see things like, oh yeah, we grew up inside of diet culture. Like, “It's not like you're crazy, adrienne.” We grew up inside constantly thinking about these things in ways that may or may not have actually been healthy, right?

Autumn: And a culture of scarcity around food, even though food was plentiful in our home.

April: Yeah.

amb: Oh yeah.

April: This whole conversation is so fascinating.

On Parents, Parenting, and Accountability

amb: Do you know what else is so interesting? Watching how Autumn is raising her kids. Our parents raised us very much like—we see how y'all are, and we're excited about how y'all are. They come from that generation that were told, “Kids are supposed to be seen, and not heard.” We were constantly challenging that, and there was still a sense of “good behavior” and right ways of being and doing. But seeing how Autumn is raising her kids, none of that is on the table. Especially post-pandemic, they're just like . . . We are who we are, we're saying what we're saying, and we see what's

going on.

April: I love it. I love spending time with them.

amb: They're totally, fully realized. Growing up, April was always face in a book, face in a story, obsessively reading and in an imaginary, imaginative world. Autumn's middle child is basically the same way, but she's been given free rein and so she's like, I'm going to make fan fiction and take it to the next level.

We did not always get to do this as kids; the family took priority over anything else. For Autumn's kids, if we're all going to watch a movie together, they can say "I'm gonna be over here on my computer, still writing my stories."

Jill: In Autumn's family, with the kids, how do you see them resolving conflict between the three of them?

Autumn: This has been quite a journey for us. For them. I guess the shortest way to say it is in 2019, I split up with my husband and co-parent. We had a very, very traumatic and dramatic split.

Jill: Ah, I'm so sorry.

Autumn: Thank you. It ended up being very good; it has been amazing for me.

Jill: It's been the right thing.

Autumn: The best decision I made as an adult was getting divorced. But getting out of the marriage was really, really hard. And the kids witnessed a lot of things that they just should never have had to witness. I'm glad I got them out because, in the last few years a lot of the work I've been doing as a mom has been repairing their understanding of how conflict is resolved, by establishing really different routines and sensibilities inside of my household.

What I've established in our household is that everyone's entitled to disagree with one another, and everyone's entitled to take space from one another when frustrated. In fact, taking space is the first thing that we do. Like, the go-to is space rather than talking, which can be hard for me!

Jill: Yes. I understand.

Autumn: And if I'm having to play any kind of mediation role, I'm really just trying to help each child have a little bit of empathy around what might have been going on for the other one. Cause my whole thing is like, you know, y'all are all really close in age. And the likelihood that you're

both at least equally responsible for conflict is pretty high.

Jill: There you go. Indeed. [laughter]

Autumn: They like to think that so-and-so's in control. But if you're thirteen and your brother is fifteen, he doesn't really control your life in any way.

Jill: That's right.

Autumn: For me, a lot of my work with them is encouraging them to take responsibility for themselves. To be accountable. And to know you're still responsible for yourself and for your behavior, no matter what. And they know that there are certain things that aren't allowed. Like, they're not allowed to call each other names.

amb: And they also really know how to bring stuff to you. There's so much trust in you as a parent. There's such a sense of like, this needs to be handled. If you say we just need to resolve it or let it go, we will. You're like justice in the household.

Autumn: Right. And I mean, this is still an evolving practice for me, I'm still leaning into it. When do I get involved, and when do I tell them that they have to do it on their own . . . And I think I'm still a little overly involved and working to extract myself. The way that I know that is when they're with their dad, if they have a heated conflict at dad's house, they will all start texting me about it. [laughter]

Jill: But they trust you, deeply.

Autumn: They will need to have the skills to resolve things between themselves, whether they're here or not.

I've had to do a lot of work with them to help them understand that some of the things that they're frustrated about with each other have nothing to do with their actual relationships, and they should be trying to have solidarity with each other.

Jill: That's such a meaningful intervention, to point out how you're steering them back to each other, at this stage.

Autumn: They've been much more peaceable with each other in the last year.

Jill: Most of us learn how to fight within our families of origin, right? As we've worked on this book, I've shared stories with adrienne about my family and my partner's family. In his family, conflict was not only suppressed, but it was also sent underground. It was a clear value not to

have conflict. Early on, when I shared that my sisters and I fought a lot growing up, my mother-in-law shared that her kids never fought. At first my reaction was disbelief, but when she insisted, my reaction was “That’s a red flag!”

amb: Yes. Absolutely.

Jill: And in my opinion, this strong resistance and orientation away from conflict meant that my partner and his siblings had fewer opportunities to build real intimacy with each other, and to learn how to communicate and resolve in the ways you’re talking about, Autumn. So your intervention allows your children to build their relationship with each other. And that’s such a crucial and primary relationship.

Autumn: There came a point for me where I realized that their relationship with each other is, in some ways, going to be as, if not more, important than the one they have with me and their father. I do think our relationships with our parents are the most important relationships that we have. But there was a point when I realized that they need to be able to orient to each other.

amb: One dynamic that’s just occurring to me. When things happen now, where we’re rubbing each other the wrong way or there’s a misunderstanding, this used to create a sense of crisis and urgency. I was like, our whole relationship is on the line! High dramatics! And now it’s more like, oh, April’s upset with me. I know we’re gonna get to it, right?

April: Yeah. [laughter]

amb: So, we had a moment this past year where I was putting on my musical ritual in Amsterdam, and Autumn and I were booked to go to Ireland the next week. And April had been very overwhelmed and not been able to come to all the family calls or whatever. So, there was a missed moment, inside of this all, of her actually hearing what our plan was, and why it was the way it was. So, she’s like, no one even told me you guys are going to Amsterdam and like, what the fuck?

April: And they went to see Beyoncé.

Jill: Oh shit. [laughter]

amb: We’re like, oh, we’re going to see her in Amsterdam, you’re gonna go see Beyoncé in Stockholm. It was a moment where I was like, “Oh, well, you know, I shared it,” you know? And April was like “Well, here’s what I experienced.” But in that moment, there was a stickiness. I felt like it was

an old pattern.

April: Mmhmm.

amb: But normally it would cause a ton of panic in me, of like [sharp intake of breath] right? Instead, I was just like, oh, sumpin is up, April's feeling a way, but I think she's overwhelmed. Instead of jumping to "April hates me," I jumped to April's feeling overwhelmed, right? And so, then it was like, hey, we need to check in.

April: That's right.

Jill: Love it.

amb: So, the next time we were all together, we sat down and checked in. Once we were done with just April's part, I was like, "I understand! I understand, girl!" [laughter]

For me, when we used to not be good, this kind of thing would wake me up. I feel like the sister check-in has reduced that. Like, it doesn't ever go all the way away, because that's just how my brain is wired. And I know when I'm out of alignment with someone.

But it really has reduced it to where I'm like, "Okay, that is a thing." And I know we're going to get to it, whether virtually or in person! Even though I think the value for us is when we're all together. We've set the intention of doing it monthly. I wouldn't say that we've quite pulled that off, but I feel like now we don't go too long . . .

April: It increases empathy because I think each of us is busy and has a lot on our plates. And it's really easy to get into your own head about how busy you are individually, and how much you've got going on. And so then, you know, you remind yourself that Autumn has this entire creative world, and she's a mom. adrienne's got eighteen projects going on and more to come! The sister check-in has really helped. We have a sister chat group, so that we can just message each other too. Like, it really helps to just be like, hey, we haven't talked in a while, here's what's happening in my life. And that does help.

Autumn: I want to say the one thing I can take credit for . . .

April: Yes, you can.

Autumn: . . . is the title of our chat.

amb: The title?

Autumn: Title of our chat, "sisterfest"? And then we set up our family text chat, it's "family fest." [laughter]

amb: Autumn, do you remember? So, there was also a moment when I went on my sabbatical in 2012 . . .

April: Sistercation!

amb: Sistercation. So, I went on my sabbatical in 2012 and, I got a gift. Someone was like, here you can have this place in Costa Rica. And it was a house that had a private pool overlooking . . .

Autumn: Infinity pool!

amb: . . . the ocean. Infinity pool, overlooking the jungle and the ocean. Every night we watched the bats and dragonflies come out to eat the mosquitoes—it was just amazing. There were monkeys coming by. We were out there just having a blast. I'll just say that. But it was a really formative moment for us, the three of us going to do something on our own. And this year, Autumn is on sabbatical, and so we're like, we need to do it again. We need another . . .

Jill: Sistercation! This sounds grand!

Sister Is a Verb

amb: In an essay Alexis Pauline Gumbs wrote about Aishah Shahidah Simmons, she talks about *sister* as a verb. When April came out to visit me in Oakland; when we took our sister vacation; and when we started being more intentional about how we spend our time together, that felt like we were making sister a verb in our lives.

April: Yes, yes, yes.

amb: We've gone through pregnancy losses, we've gone through grandparent loss, we've gone through dog loss, we've gone through major relationship loss, we've gone through mental health challenges. I mean, the IRS took all my money! We've gone through so many things . . .

Autumn: We've gone through April living in a war zone, an active war zone.

amb: Multiple war zones, yeah. We've gone through this. And because I think people outside might look at our lives as wildly different or having different visibilities or whatever, one thing I can attest to, from inside the sistering process, is that each of us has an equally big life and an equally impactful life, right? So, wherever we are, I have the deepest respect for my sisters. Their opinions are like top-tier opinions to me.

They are having as much impact on history and on people in their lives as I'm having in mine. And it matters, to each of us, to be doing good with our lives. And the sistering practice allows for this—going big but knowing if this situation doesn't have integrity, I can leave it. You know?

Jill: Amen.

amb: I know I can fall back into the arms of my sisters. But all of our lives are equally sized—in my mind, it really is so important to me.

Autumn: We all are living extremely epic lives. Very big, very impactful. I think about this all the time, like, I look at my astrological chart, which April will laugh at me saying this . . .

April: I love it that you do, though. [laughter]

Autumn: My chart literally says that I am here to do something extremely big and my purpose on this planet at this time, this lifetime, is a big one. And so I won't be small for anyone. And what makes that possible is I have these folks who I grew up with, who understand who I am, how I operate, and they understand my purpose, and they only want to see me thrive.

amb: Yeah.

Autumn: Because we live in a world where you can't trust that that energy will come from most other people. We've all had this experience. I mean, we all have chosen family; we all have folks that we built relationships with who are our chosen people. . .

amb: Yeah, we've sistered others. [laughs]

Autumn: From a flanked position! And we also have plenty of people, all three of us, in our lives who come to us because they want to extract something from us. And we've all had to navigate that in our careers, in our personal lives, in romantic relationships, you know what I mean. . .

Jill: I would imagine that there are people who step to you, all three of you, with unclean energy, certainly. People who step to you who might want to test you a little bit, you know? I don't know if that happens at all . . .

amb: [singing] "Lord helps the mister that comes between me and my sister, and . . .

April: And lord help the sister who comes between me and my man." [laughter]

amb: I don't know if this feels this true for y'all, but I feel like I've

definitely had the troubled partner alley, right? I'm laughing about this now, because at one point I remember telling April, "I don't know if you have good taste in dating," and it turns out that I have the worst taste in dating, or I have the worst taste in dating for me, I'll say! But you know, I have definitely had folks who were trying to wedge between my sisters and me, and that was the flag, right?

And if I'm lost in the sauce, they will say "Here's how we feel about it." My sisters are never wrong about this stuff. So, I'm gonna go learn this the hard way, but they're right.

Autumn: I'm still gonna go learn this the hard way.

amb: I'm gonna go learn this the hard way.

April: Because I need this lesson. I need this lesson. But I hear you, and I'll come back to that. [laughter]

amb: When I went through my last big breakup, I mean, I was really, like, in the danger zone, in all ways. When I went through the breakup, I immediately was like, I'm making a group, a support group for myself, and my sisters were the first two people in it.

Jill: Of course.

amb: And inside of the support group, I had a range of people. People who were like, hell to the fuck no, never talk to this person again. People who were like, it's okay to navigate this with gentleness and, you know, like da-da-da-da-da, and like, blah-blah-blah. And my sisters were in that range, you know? And then there were a few other people. But I also knew that you guys warned me about this. You already knew about this. You're up to speed on everything that's been going on. But now I need extraction support because I can't get myself out alone.

April: I did offer up my husband for that extraction support . . .

amb: Ooh! My god. Literally my sister was like, we can drive down *right now*. And it helps to have one sister who's an aikido master.

April: Yeah, Autumn will throw somebody into the wall. [laughter]

amb: April's got the dogs. I feel like I have all levels of support and protection. [laughter]

Jill: Sistering as a verb, there you go. Love it.

amb: There's certain calls that I've gotten from each of them and I'm like, okay, I can come there, I can come; we can come take care of the kids. We can come, what needs to happen?

Jill: There is so much joy and resilience in this conversation. Is there anything else you wanna share with me that I didn't touch on, that feels important around this practice, what it's meant to you, what it's meant for the relationships between the three of you?

April: I'll say two things, actually. One is that how we've gone about sister check-ins has really helped me think about helping others create communication models. Or about how you encourage conversation as a way to resolve an issue. I will do this at work with my team; if two members of my team are disagreeing about something, or I see one of them treating the other disrespectfully, I'm like, whoa, whoa, whoa. That's actually not the way that we're gonna handle these kinds of situations. How about you two talk out whatever your perspectives are and, like, let's get to that issue? Or why don't you take a beat, and then come back and talk it through? What we're not gonna do is mistreat each other. And I feel like I really got that out of the growth of sister check-in.

Jill: That's so great, April. And not the norm.

April: I also remember early in our marriage, when we were living abroad, and my husband was really unhappy there. It was during our first year there, and it had been kind of a traumatic year for the family. I didn't really know what to do. And I remember being on the phone with adrienne, and she asked, are there things that you could do to carve out spaces of happiness? Even if you're not entirely happy, and if you can't make yourselves happy living there, are there things that you can carve out that are like your happy pockets? It was such a great and uniquely adrienne way to think about it. You need a happy pocket. We don't necessarily love living here, but we can come up with routines that are very joyful for us. And we can find an activity that we do that's outside the city that's very joyful for us.

amb: Definitely.

April: And that is an important part of communication in any adult relationship, but especially in a partnership, right? Even if you're at a stressful time, like, what's the happy thing that we can create in this moment? And then we just keep building and layering. But that comes from this kind of communication and support with each other. So, yeah.

Jill: Love it. Love it. Yes! Pleasure activism in action!

April: Yes! It is! Completely. adrienne wrote a book and I lived it.

[laughter]

Autumn: Happy pockets.

April: Happy pockets.

Jill: Happy pockets.

April: Sister pockets. I'm gonna stick that happiness in my pocket. I'm gonna carry it around with me.

amb: I will say, too, that we inspire each other's best lives. Autumn has gotten into aikido this past year and it's like . . .

April: Yes!

amb: . . . seeing that, I'm like, oh, I need something, I need to remember what it feels like to be passionate about something I can do in my body that way. I need to go work out or I need to do this. It's like, you have to get passionate about something you love in that way.¹⁵ Or April getting a home that has a pool, and being fully happy about this for her!

Jill: Yes!

amb: It's really helpful to be in relationships with people where you're like, I see how you're doing it. And something is becoming possible by watching what you're doing, you know?

Jill: Love it. Miss Autumn, you got anything before we pause on this?

Autumn: No, my sisters are fucking geniuses.

Jill: Absolutely. Full stop.

April: Autumn is our baby genius. [laughter]

amb: [singing] That's just my baby genius.

Jill: You're learning from the best.

Autumn: Learning from the best! I mean, it's funny, I'm totally having an "I'm living my best life moment" right now.

April: Yeah. Deeply. You're deeply living it.

Autumn: Wow! I am living my best life right now. And I do think we inspire each other; we support each other toward our best lives. And, and we've been able to cross this threshold together—we weren't put on this earth to suffer. And we don't owe anyone our suffering. And so, it's been so good to make shifts that free us from economic difficulties. And we share with one another all the things that we're learning about stabilizing our lives so that we can have the best version of life. Like, we are all homeowners now! We all have enough financial stability and liquidity that we can take vacations and do nice things for ourselves and nice things for

each other. We're reaching a point in our family where we're shifting our gift giving process—because we don't actually need things from each other—and instead, buy an experience for all of us, or we're gonna all make donations to a charity of our choice as a family because like, we're good.

Jill: We're good! Yeah. Love it, love it.

amb: Yeah. And I want to say that we have excellent parents. They fell in love, they chose each other, they were married four months later. By choosing to marry each other, my mom was cut off from anything that she would have received; they started out their relationship basically in poverty. So, to look at where they've come from, and how far they've come. They've been able to buy their own home, and they have three children who are able to buy their own homes. And we're in a familial structure where we talk about how money works . . .

That also feels like one of the benefits of the deepening of relationship; I trust you enough to learn from you and share with you. It's like the abundance of relationship actually yields and supports lived abundance among us. There's also a sense that if any of us is going through something, we've all got each other.

Autumn: Yeah. And we're all gonna learn from it.

April: Yeah!

Jill: And we're all gonna learn from it. I can't think of a better way to finish this beautiful convo.

For real.

14. I would actually count a set of my closest friendships as committed relationships that are also part of my daily survival and companionship, and are *not* defined by conflict. But perhaps that's another book?

15. I am now back to daily swimming! #bodyjoy

Righting Solidarity: Flocking Together

I have said a few times recently that confusion is a colonial tactic.¹⁶ You can get away with a lot of oppression and displacement while people are dissociated, overwhelmed, mis- or uninformed, or trying to figure out what's going on. The level of multiple crises unfolding concurrently makes it impossible to keep up with everything, even with our own impact on the world.

Especially for those of us living within the colonial narratives, boundaries, and media mess of a declining global superpower—we generally don't know we are dehumanizing a people until we are *made* to know. That's how these systems maintain themselves. As I write this, there is a ton of confusion around the right stance on Israel. Oppressive regimes count on the reality that few of us have the capacity to become experts on every region or struggle. The good news is that we don't need to become experts in any region to move with and towards humanity, connection, and solidarity. When oppression is unfolding, I rely on trusting my community of organizers and those living in the oppressive conditions to inform my stance. Palestinian, Arab, and anti-Zionist Jewish organizers have taught and continue to teach me how my politic of freedom and justice and interdependence can be advanced in this moment on the frontline that is Palestine.

My informed stance is that Israel is an apartheid, colonial project, and that Zionism is structured supremacist thinking. What keeps me grounded when others are confused is remembering that my nation is generally on the wrong side of history—the colonial, imperialist, capitalist side. We try to maintain dominance at any cost. When I feel confused about a global issue, I often look to the Global South, including Palestine, for direction. Through that broader lens, I can see that the US is out of alignment with most of the rest of the world, which has been trying to intervene on Israel's apartheid behaviors for decades. Here in the US, there's not just endless rhetorical support for Israel, there's structural and material support beyond all comprehensible measures, flowing as an unchecked resource from the United States government, most of the United States media, and United States corporations. The overwhelming majority of US citizens want a ceasefire in the current bombardment of Gaza by the Israeli government,

but our US government won't even consider it. This not only feels demoralizing; because paying taxes is nonnegotiable, having no ability to stop taxes from flowing to war and genocidal campaigns is a form of economic abuse.

What keeps me grounded is remembering that there are always openings, often in the places where people are asking me to feel my connections to humanity, and to feel the pain of all the people being harmed and killed. I don't have to know all the answers—given the state of dysfunction in the US and the colonial history and ongoing occupation of this land, it's ridiculous to think I or we have any authority on what other nations should do. What I know is that no people are deserving of genocide and erasure, and that I can intervene at the point that my nation is participating in that. What I see is that with each act of violence from Israel, more of the world gets clear that Zionism is inhumane, which means the portal to a free Palestine opens wider.

What keeps me grounded is the practice of offering loving corrections. I can love all of the people of earth, I can extend compassion to each one, and I can see how our current systems make people feel so unloved and unprotected that war feels like the only way to live. I bear witness to the inhumanity of war, and the horrific consequences of apartheid and white supremacy, which are basically ideologies of constant war. I summon my stamina to listen, I share what I'm learning with others, and I oppose denialism, hatred, and the dehumanization of Palestinians.

I've brought some different reminders and resources together for US movement workers, artists, activists, and friends as we flock together. In this moment, with this murmuration, we are casting spells to move our species beyond the reach of genocide.

People are overwhelmed by grief and the concurrent catastrophes of the world.

This is not the beginning of this crisis, and it is not the only unfolding crisis. I know a multitude of people who are so steeped in their own crises, loss, and burnout that it has been hard to turn and face this latest battle. Do not assume anything about other people's lives, stances, or capacities. Lean into relationship. Ask what's needed and how people are, with real care. Then, give people a way to be in solidarity.

Practice: I have been sending my loved ones specific actions they can do,

including donations they can make, and moves that are quick, necessary, efficient. This ties them into the growing movement without requiring participation in the quagmire of social media. I check on them with love, and I share the actions I take so they have opportunities to join in.

We must remember that genocide cannot happen without the exact kind of suppression and dehumanization of one group of people that we are currently seeing. We are on the side of life and love, not policing and control; be a fractal of welcome, belonging, and solidarity.

We know history always lands in judgment of genocide and apartheid. One day it will be normal to honor the humanity, political existence, and sovereignty of Palestinians. But being on the right side of history usually means we watch with horror as others realize the truth too late.

Right now, we are already lifetimes too late; we are grieving unnecessary deaths and losses. Don't let your own shame and guilt about that lateness turn your call to action into an attack on others coming through the door behind you. Everyone has to find the actions that generate their inner peace, their inner knowing that they are doing all they can in a time when nothing feels like enough.

And remember, social media is not the whole world. Many people are moving behind the scenes to hold and support each other in right relationship with the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Some people are making calls and planning actions or having crucial conversations instead of making and sharing posts. Some people are on a different app than you. Rather than policing each other's social media presence, be concerned if people you know and have respect for are being impacted by the suppression efforts. Celebrate, flank, and embrace each risk people take to speak up "even as their voices shake." Welcome these acts of courage, even if they aren't perfect in your eyes, or an exact replica of your actions. Invite and share perspectives, rather than screaming corrections. You don't know everything that anyone else is up against, or how fragile the limb they are inching along feels to them.

Don't forget that we are in a backlash moment, a slide-toward-global-fascism moment, a moment when misinformation, hacking, and fake news are being deployed to keep us divided and disempowered. When those who appear to have the most power feel like they have the least room to speak honestly about the injustices of the world, we are all in trouble.

When suppression happens, when people are fired and defunded and offers rescinded, we must understand that these are minor consequences compared with how Palestinian people are suffering; they are paying with their lives, their homes, their physical health, and their safety. We must offer support, gratitude, jobs, and community.

After all, we don't just want to be on the right side of history, we want to be an intervention in the present that changes history. We aren't performing solidarity; we are in it together. We are not police; we are the movement that liberates all of us from every kind of cage.

We have to show the world that we are irrepressible multitudes. We have to invite people into our movements with certainty that we will win, and with gratitude that they have come. We have to build an abundant future in which we can celebrate what we give up when we divest from oppressive systems.

Practice: I am intentionally commenting on posts that support ceasefire and an end to the occupation, and privately expressing gratitude and acknowledgment of the risks people are taking to add their voices to this intervention.

I am a student of belonging and I recognize that my liberation is tied up with the liberation of all oppressed peoples. I invite you to join me here and learn as we go.

Part of the confusion of this moment is rooted in a durable, commonly shared US politic that is liberal or progressive but has accommodated and accepted the apartheid state of Israel. Many of us have been critical of this “progressive except Palestine” stance. We have encountered movement comrades who support reproductive justice, immigrant rights, LGBTQIA+ and gender equality, Black Lives Matter, unions and labor, and oppose the crimes of US empire, but remain silent, or resistant, about Israel's crimes.

And, sadly, many of us have been slow to challenge these gross misalignments, in relationship and within our communities. This reticence—within movement and non-movement spaces—has had devastating, undermining, and deadly consequences. We have needed to break this down for many years. We must offer these loving corrections NOW.

Remember the rules of flocking.

Move in right relationship to those closest to you, maintaining the right

distance to feel each other's shifts. Don't crash into each other. Avoid predation. No one is setting the permanent direction for the whole flock—each one is finding the next best adaptive step when they are at the front, and following when they are at the middle or the back.

Practice: Right now, we are trying to build the largest and most effective possible murmuration for Palestinian freedom in history, which means following Palestinian leadership and calls to action.

Stagger.

No one can sustain being in the front of the migration from old ideas to new ideas indefinitely.

If you already know a great deal about Palestine but are too exhausted or in too much grief and shock to be a teacher in this moment, please rest and grieve. This is especially true for the most impacted communities, those who have lost homes and loved ones. This is long-term work in a devastating time.

If you have been organizing hard and nonstop as if you alone are going to change the outcome of this moment, trust the millions of other people mobilizing for Palestine to keep going while you refill your cup.

This is a politicizing moment!

If you have always believed something racist or dehumanizing about Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, or Jewish people, the light of this moment may feel sharp or confusing or painful for you.

Feel for the Palestinians who have, like Indigenous people of North America, been violently displaced from their homes, cast as savages in the narrative of development, used and discarded to serve the material desires of those with more power, and crushed into the unjust living conditions of apartheid. Despite all this, they are expected to be docile, compliant, unified and civil in their resistance, even though the rest of the world has never responded adequately to their nonviolent efforts at liberation.

I have had so many people ask me if my heart is big enough to also hold Jewish and Israeli pain. Jewish pain is easy for me to hold—I have been moved many times in my life by the solidarity of suffering and liberation between Jewish and Black peoples, and I have many friendships and intimate relationships with Jewish people, which have given me deep love

and respect for the culture, the sacred love of life and family, and the long journey of recovering from obliterating trauma.

My path toward compassion for the Israelis has been more complex, as I have come to understand the path of Zionism as one that aligns its practitioners with white supremacy. I know that Israelis have as many perspectives on themselves and their government as we do in the United States, so I hold space for the ways we all work against the legacies and ongoing traumatizing choices of our governments. Those committed to Zionism receive the same kind of compassion that I offer those who believe in white supremacy—I hurt, to feel that such fear and hatred has blossomed in their hearts and communities. And I pray that they are able to return to humanity, to belonging, to relationships that aren't defined by domination or isolation.

Practice: For those of us who have the capacity, we need to meet those awakening right now with love and abundant resources. That is forever the work of the organizer, the movement worker, and the artist—we are not above the people, we are flocking *with* the people. Sometimes we lead, sometimes we follow, and we always learn. We are making the revolution irresistible (as Toni Cade Bambara told us to do), and we are loving our people enough to make them conscious of what they don't see (as James Baldwin taught us).¹⁷

As embodied movements, movements that are not just strategizing from the head but building a liberating path from our bodies, it is our responsibility to help these massive and appropriate feelings ground people into righteous action.

Feel your feelings. But don't despair, not as long as Palestinian people live and have hope. As Grace Paley said, "the only recognizable feature of hope is action," so (as Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes teach us), "let this radicalize you!"¹⁸

Spread your wings, notice who you are flying with, and keep moving.

free palestine

the grief builds up
when it spills over
it touches everyone

can you imagine
... upon hearing this news
that it is not one pain or the other
one grief or the other
one safety or the other

one wound winds through us all
gaping wide
festering, blooming

can you not imagine
... hearing this news
with a wide enough heart
for the grief of each parent
for the grief of each child

the land grieves too
the whole earth breaks
on the shores of gaza

we must imagine
... before the fissure scars
we must all imagine freedom
if we want that future
beyond all war

the border is the wound

i will not let my heart
shrink to the size of my oppressor's
i will stay soft

i will pray with dignity
for the absolute freedom of all humans
from hatred and the myth of separation

i will dance pure love upon the moon
so far from my oppressor
that i can return with her heart

here is how i practice

in war i keep the dead unsegregated
dreaming together their spirits
who know what flesh cannot

i shake off monoliths
i ask, right now, who are the prisoners
and who are their guards

i do not let those
at peace with oppression
tell me i am heartless

i do not perform my grief
—i weep freely at the altar
i pray up their names

i critique abroad what i critique at home
i know every aspect of my freedom
is unexpected here, still precarious

i see all the humanity
the mistakes, the narrow sharp lives
left in the wake of trauma

i know my country well
we always think our motives invisible
we are always naked

in my hands are thousands of rivers
pain, confusion, misinformation, fury
but . . . the eyes of those children watch me

i start at the freshest cut
as the earth whispers:
the border is the wound

even now, between us

the words are full of love and vibrant root systems and small bags of zaatar
and the laughter of children and the call for peace
the words are welcome, the words are comfort, the words are witness to
atrocities then warning, wait, wait, and then wailing

the words are pacing inside a fence wanting someone to listen to the song of
the olive tree facing the roaring bulldozer
the words are growing like everything grows but the world of words is
getting smaller, so many mouths filling with fire
the words are older than the border and growing old inside the border and
each body is somehow becoming a border
the words are piling up inside of people told their love is violence, weeping
over white bags full of all the other stories
unspeakable words become seed or suicide. the words now bloodstained,
play without parents, silent under the rubble

the seeds are still love, planted deep in the earth
the seeds know they are always and forever home
the seeds are as animal as we are, as innocent as we are, as ancient as we
are
the seeds will grow wild, vast and tall
the seeds are watered by the tears of each survivor and the half of the world
who believes in their existence
the seeds dance diasporic grief into a drum that only knows the rhythm of
the heart
the seeds are full of freedom, the only fruit which can grow everywhere—
even now, between us
the seeds will free everyone, one day—even those who pressed them into
the dirt

¹⁶. I wrote this piece on solidarity with Palestine, but I believe it can be applied to global solidarity work of all kinds.

¹⁷. Thabiti Lewis, ed., *Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2017). James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

¹⁸. Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2023).

Righting Ableism: Disability Justice Is for All Bodies

When our bodies are able or perceived as healthy, we do not live in the world we think we live in. I remember this world, in my bones. At some points in my life, I did not have to measure the miles, count the stairs, eyeball the support capacity of the chair, pray the wheelchair was thick booty-sized, ask strangers to help me exist. I didn't have to process other people's commentary on my gaining or losing weight, and what that might have to do with my health. There was a freedom in it, a trust in my body's capacity to carry me, hold me, lift me, move me, and change with me, and that was affirmed by others.

For me, it was little tastes of freedom, brief periods of freedom, because from early in my life I felt the implication that something was wrong with my body. My miraculous body! Yes, in the pauses, and looks and suggestions and recommendations all around me, I was being told often that my body needed control, management, that I needed to constantly strive to be normal, to have a normal, slender, fit, active, strong, white, perfect, beautiful, 20/20, functional, flawless body. And that all the parts of myself that spilled outside of this mold were a failure on my part. I have had to make it a practice to stay grateful for the opportunity to learn to love this body more deeply every day.

We live in a world of wondrous, divergent, temporary bodies, each one different. Our bodies are made to survive on earth, and there are a million small and large distinctions in the bodies we receive. Our bodies experience our lives viscerally, freezing up, running away, bearing the brunt, breaking, tearing, receiving the injuries, receiving the delight, being held, all of it. So much beautiful work is being done to help us understand what bodies know, what they intuit, what they remember, how they heal, and what they are capable of. But what they are *not* capable of is externally defined, permanent perfection.

Each body that you have lived in and will live in—your child body, teen body, adult body, elder body, healthy body, ailing body—each one is sacred, sovereign, special, and deserving of support. Each body you come across in the world, from parents to friends to lovers to children to teachers to coworkers to strangers—each one is sacred, sovereign, special, and deserving of support. The processes you go through to find ways to relate to

your body, to manage pain, manage mobility, and in other ways live in your body, those processes are sacred too.

When we cannot see that, when we withhold support unless it is demanded, or give it grudgingly, we are participating in an ableist world view. When we repress the needs and demands of our own bodies, we are participating in internalized ableism. When we tell others how to manage their bodies, we are being ableist. This is a growth edge for everyone with a body.

COVID-19 uncovered so many places where we need to develop deeper analysis, and more precise communication practices. I am experiencing the tertiary impacts of COVID-19 personally in ongoing ways as I am expected to return to traveling to give speeches, even though the pandemic continues, and the daily death rate is steady; even though I could share my ideas without putting my body at risk, and into conditions that often exacerbate my disabilities.

What I notice is that I hunger for a disability justice frame to be normalized and present in all human relationships. When we demand that, in this age of COVID-19 and other viruses and pandemics, people must travel and expose themselves continuously to potentially fatal illnesses, we are participating in collective ableism. Being able to name that can point us to more effective practices.

And, with love, we must acknowledge that our movements have been overriding the needs of our workers, our communities, ourselves in the name of urgent work for a long time. I was a part of this culture; I've been impacted and educated, and I've grown. And I still believe the work is urgent! It's also lifelong: how do we work in ways that meet the most needs, with maximum efficiency, while sustaining the longest-term visions?

What does it look like to start from a place of considering the needs of everyone in the room and seeing them all as justified needs? To have conversations about all bodies with consent? To understand that all bodies are sovereign?

We live in an era of incredible teachers who can guide us toward how we create movements that are sanctuaries for all our bodies. I have been blessed to learn this path from Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, Alice Wong, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Shira Hassan, Sins Invalid, the Disability Justice Collective, and many others. I am grateful to everyone

who has taught me to see and be in my body.

An Addendum/Apology

On this note, I have a loving self-correction.

When COVID-19 hit, I experienced loss, grief, and fear, like everyone else. When the vaccines became available, I didn't understand the choices of those who opted not to get them. We live in a world that has eradicated so many fatal illnesses through widespread vaccine distribution; why resist this one? I've always kept anti-vaxxers on my periphery. I felt like I traveled too much and have seen too much straightforward evidence of the privilege of vaccine access to second guess.

I've learned. People resist vaccines because they have the right to question what gets produced in our medical industrial complex, and what the long-term impacts such intense treatments might have. Even if it increases the challenges of navigating common space, even if it means being more proactive about communicating around something controversial, it is not my place to make decisions for those who don't want to vaccinate their bodies.

Yes, I have a right to set boundaries based on those choices. Yes, I have a right to move with vaccine transparency, and expect that from those I share space with. And on a collective level, we have the right, responsibility, and need to determine and set collective protocols, ideally to protect the most vulnerable among us (which is not necessarily a clear group in the vaccination conversation). We get to protect ourselves from harm; we don't get to decide what others do with their own bodies, even if it leads to inconvenience for those who choose the less popular path.

We still live in an interdependent and interconnected world. Our individual choices have an impact on each other. Smokers were annexed for years before legislation started to account for the dangers of secondhand smoke. We will have to keep finding ways together to deal with the secondhand and communal impacts of those who don't vaccinate against COVID-19. I believe this is what it means to be pro-choice all the way.

Righting High: A Word to My Fellow Cannabis Users

As someone who has been proudly pro-cannabis for my whole adult life, I want to have a little talk just with my weed-loving family.

Most of us can't be high at the meeting.

Or the mediation.

Or the action.

At least not *that* high.

Y'all know I *love* weed—it has saved my life, my body, and my mind. I love being high alone. I love being high in a group of high people, feeling wonder, and release. I love weed, and I am grateful that it is being legalized and normalized in more and more places.

And yet . . . I don't love facilitating a bunch of high people. And I have yet to meet any facilitators or mediators who feel like they can do their best work with a room where half of the people are in an altered state that wasn't consented to, or the explicit purpose of the gathering. Many of us are talking quietly about how to navigate this with the communities we serve, and how to hold a higher and higher movement.

In my own experience, weed can make things confusing and foggy. It has made my mind wander. It has made me paranoid and reactive. It has slowed me down. It shifts my perception and my presence.

I have learned to be choiceful about when I am high, where, with whom, and why. I get high on my time. I get high in places where I will be safe. I get high with people I trust and can be uninhibited around. I try to get high for pleasure and relief, not escape.

Access to weed has shifted massively in my lifetime. It used to be joints and blunts and bongos that I wouldn't dream of smoking during work time. But then it became vape pens, tinctures, capsules, and delicious (often overdosing) edibles. Most of us aren't designed to handle 20, 30, 50, or 100 mg doses of cannabis at a time, but more and more often our weed comes in packages of something munchy-aligned, of which we are supposed to just have one square-of-chocolate or bite-of-cookie or gummy-worm or something ridiculous like that. Raise your inner mind-hand if you have had the experience of being too high. Raise two imagined hands if you have experienced it often, but still keep going there.

It's so tender to watch us collectively overdose, understanding what we

are up against. This world is overstimulating and tragic.

As weed use legalizes, it's now not unusual to have organizers step out of a high stakes meeting at break time and get high, then try to come back and strategize, debate, or make decisions.

There is a conversation on the harm reduction approach to substance use in life, and I encourage having those conversations with loved ones as needed. I am specifically talking here about the way we use this sacred herb at the meeting, in the healing space, at the training, in our movement realm.

Being high at the meeting is like being high or intoxicated anytime around sober people: we *think* we are participating well, and that maybe people can't even tell the difference. As someone who has both been high at the meeting, and facilitated the high people at the meeting, I can attest that being high really impacts participation. We're unable to be as present, unable to sense the shifts in energy in the room, and unable to follow the conversation, which, in an organizing context, means we are unable to advocate for the people who sent us there.

I'm not saying don't get high, I'm not saying we shouldn't get the relief we need. I'm just saying, in the same way most people can't be functionally drunk at the meeting and expect revolutionary results and outcomes, most of us can't be high at the meetings we need right now.

There is CBD for anxiety and helping the body to experience respite from pain and contraction. And there are after-hours concoctions for recreation.

I believe if organizations and networks and movement spaces talk openly about this, we can create cultures that can hold our various needs for medicine and fun and sobriety. There can also be conversations and culture setting around making the work we do together more sustainable and manageable, work we don't need to numb our way through or escape from even as we do it.

Now maybe you are one of those rare potheads who can really function while high. Know thyself. But maybe ask the people you work with for some honest feedback on this, because there are *very* few exceptional people who can get high and bring their best selves to collective work. With humility, most of us can't handle it, and the work we are doing deserves our clearheaded attention.

Righting Boundaries: Cultivate Your Privacy, Tend Your Wounds

We are the generation learning to live with the increased connection and visibility of the internet. We have discovered that so many of us have so many kinds of content to share—we are teachers, comedians, healers, fashionistas, artists, philosophers, journalists, historians, and storytellers. I have been amazed at the creativity and complexity of the people in my communities as many of us grow comfortable showing more sides of ourselves online. I have also felt the reticence and judgment of those of us trained to keep a hard line between our personal and professional selves, watching what feels like a generational shift toward oversharing.

I wanted to write a brief note to offer people (me included) a bit more space to cultivate a life that is not online—which is not to say you have to give up what you enjoy about social media. But consider that online, in the public sphere, even texting on your phone—these are not the best ways to talk about everything. This might be my most auntiest missive of all, so I will keep it short.

If you are thinking about something, if you are a human being having a thought about something, then you *might* need to talk about it. If you are feeling something, you might need support to really feel it thoroughly and in a healthy way. I often joke that I am most befuddled by people who are out here doing life without therapy and thick group chats (and tarot and astrology, tbh). To learn what you need to know, to process what might be stuck, to perhaps heal your centimeter of a collective wound . . . you might need to speak the words to another human, a professional, but definitely a friend or circle of intimates.

Talking about what is tender, intimate, private, new—this is one of the ways we make authentic connections. That, and playing together. At every age, most of us need to ground and process what's happening in our lives. And as we get older, if friendships can't hold both play and real talk, they tend to fall away, because life needs both. We are social creatures; even the most introverted of us need to connect to others sometimes to better understand ourselves.

But *social media and other internet spaces aren't meant to hold tenderness*, even if some of us curate pockets that feel connective and holy.

Social media is designed to sell and control, sell and control, using our humanity as the pathway and product. It can be really healing to share when we have curated spaces of people who care about us, but the boundaries of social media are so slippery, it can end up having the opposite impact. Bringing our tender parts as statements or confessions to the general public online can often mean the most vulnerable parts of us are getting bruised up by exposure in a space that is designed to sell things and grow visibility. Even when the majority of responses are kind or positive, emotionally appropriate, we can get hooked on the one response that critiques, derides, or attacks us in the place where it already hurts. We can get caught in a cycle where we are measuring public engagement on the fault lines of our hearts' broken places, doing further damage to open wounds, or worse, beginning to identify with the wound.

Now, a lot of the harm we cause each other is protected by a culture of secrecy, so I want to be clear: I am not talking about fomenting secrecy. I am talking about cultivating privacy.

We are such shame-full creatures, shaped to protect the shame before acknowledging the wound. The trick is, every part of us that we deny, withhold, or repress, every single part shapes us. We become the shape of pressure, pushing down, and in a constant contraction of our truths. Far from the light, our shameful shape festers and multiplies. The dominant social media culture right now is thrusting these parts into the spotlight, expecting people to know what to do with it. It makes me so tender to witness someone getting punitive, corrective, or lackadaisical responses to vulnerability when they've shared something that needed a soft voice and warm shoulder.

Cultivating authentic relationships supports us to discern what is for us and what is for others. Or even just *when* we share—I eventually share most things that happen to me. But I have learned so much about the health and space that comes from holding things privately until the healing has really begun.

It is a mark of our loneliness when the only place we can bring our wounds is to a fickle public sphere. It can be dangerous, it can be performative, it can briefly generate some attention and sense of togetherness, but it is rare that intimate, deep healing happens in the public spaces of the internet. We need to be held in conversation, in real life.

Some of my best friendships began online. I made them real through one on one conversations, moving to dms, phone, voice notes, texts, meeting when possible. I offer this to you especially if you are vulnerability-posting from a place of loneliness. Those online relationships can lead to the kind of connections that can truly hold your humanity. But there is a lot of dumpster fire energy out there that can't sense and honor your preciousness. Don't offer your humanity to the trash heap, my darlings—your emotional journey is your wisdom and treasure.

Righting Abundance: An Emergent Strategy Primer for Funders

In 2017, I released a book that I thought a few people would read. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* has gone further than expected. It has reached organizers, activists, facilitators, artists, designers, people of all races and class backgrounds, here in the US and all over the world.

For those not familiar, Emergent Strategy (ES) is the way we make moves toward justice and liberation in right relationship with each other and the planet, in right relationship with change, and by learning from the great teacher of nature.

In the wake of the book, I have been invited by foundations to give trainings and talks on ES, and I am hearing that major movement donors and program officers are using it. As I listen to how different funders are interpreting the work, I am realizing that some people are getting excited about ES and beginning to use the language but are missing or misinterpreting the core lessons.

I empathize—it's an exciting and massive set of ideas to grapple with—I get humbled regularly. So in the spirit of loving correction, in support of activists and organizers who need their work nurtured and amplified, I thought I'd write this piece to funders looking to experiment with and/or align with ES, and uplift some of the models I see working.

Common Misconceptions

“Anything goes! Emergent Strategy, right?”

In the past few months, I have been in conversations with funders and donors who spoke of processes that were particularly messy or chaotic in ways that impacted movement workers, and they shrugged and blamed Emergent Strategy. ES isn't an invitation to be messy across class lines or power differences. It isn't a way of speaking about general chaos. That moves us away from right relationship. ES is about nonlinear, adaptive, intentional change. What we want is interdependence, where resources can flow in a decentralized way from inequality toward justice.

“Work for free/possible money!”

I have been invited into multiple funding processes in which the expectation was that I would provide a significant amount of time in a “collective” funding process, or a cohort. In a couple of the processes, the money we were working toward had not been secured yet. In each process, there were people with wealth organizing the effort, with good intentions but not understanding how much work they were asking for. I have to say that it’s exceedingly rare that processes sparked by funders are actually easy or aligned with the processes organizers/organizations would plan for themselves.

“We are extending trust.”

I often hear funders say they are “extending trust” when they are choosing to continue to invest in someone who has been problematic in movement spaces and has not yet been accountable. Or when funders are continuing to work with organizations that are out of alignment with their movement sectors or communities—often because they are willing to contort for the sake of funders.

Philanthropists speak to me of the ES value that “no one is disposable,” which is absolutely the case! But when organizations are working toward healing, and funders don’t provide resources in alignment with their accountability process, it makes it impossible to uphold movement accountability. Divestment and disposal are not the same thing.

Core Aspects of Emergent Strategy for Funders

Trust the people. Move at the speed of trust.

ES is fundamentally about relationships—not the often forced or transactional relationships of philanthropy but relationships that are honest about the structures in place, relationships that require authenticity, and that invite learning. Consider starting with small funding, which offers to build trust by working together. Trust is built through lots of small things—conversations, interventions, successes.

Don’t drag movement momentum.

Making organizers jump through hoops to prove their impact or unveil flashy new programs every year is a sign that philanthropy is not in right relationship with those it claims to serve. Forcing social justice workers to

take on additional work (such as convenings that double as free issue consulting, unpaid selection committees, and most grant writing and reporting) is a literal drag on movement momentum.

But don't rush us either.

In general, divest from the myth of false urgency. Movements shouldn't be moving on a timeline that philanthropy sets; the reverse would be a much healthier process. Funders would do well to follow the rhythms of movements. This is true when it comes to trusting movements to move through accountability processes and conflict resolution. Offer to support good processes, rather than investing in those people or organizations creating division.

Pay attention.

Trusting the people means noticing which organizers and groups communities turn to, supporting them, and funding the ecosystems that generate them. It means putting the balance of movement-resourcing work on those with the balance of the resources.

Mistakes bring growth.

Trusting the people means trusting that mistakes and changes in the process will grow the group, which in turn means funding groups for the long term, so they have room to stumble and learn and course-correct. It is important that funders are developing trust through mistakes and learning inside of their groups as well, but as often as possible, that learning should not spill over into the work of organizers. When it does, it means that philanthropy is redistributing organizer time to meet the needs of capital. There is a palpable distinction between learning hard lessons in community versus becoming a problem for community. Keep learning, keep trusting, keep growing.

Trust boldly.

If you can't think of any groups that you would trust to directly distribute your resources in an area you fund, then you've got some work to do around trusting the people, and some work to do around building the relationships you have with communities you want to support.

One important tip here relates to how fractals interact with trust: if a

strategy hasn't been successful at a small (local, intimate) scale, it's not likely to work at a large (national, broad) scale. Trust people working over time to cultivate strategies and scale them appropriately. Fund with a fractal strategy—pay attention to groups who are experimenting and growing strategies starting at a small scale. Pay attention to collaborations that start with building relationships and political trust, instead of lofty surface-level alliances.

Leaders shaping the future are unique, not replaceable cogs in the system; build a transparent culture that can adapt to different leaders with different skills.

Since entering the formal nonprofit world, I have witnessed a handful of successful organizational leadership transitions, where a leader was developed within the organization and there was an organic, well-timed transition of power.

But more often, I've seen a desperate scramble for a replacement, where someone who didn't carry the leadership skills, capacity, or personality of the outgoing leader(s) is advanced, or someone from outside the institution is hired and a near-instant culture clash is initiated. These patterns seem especially common in smaller organizations.

As I've reflected on these challenging transitions, it's become even clearer to me that organizations are relational structures. The person, or people, who end up at the helm in a hierarchical structure usually have concurrent capacities. Some leaders have excellent external capabilities (public speaking, charisma, compelling storytelling, and/or ability to direct attention to where it is most needed) and others thrive due to internal leadership skills (structure and systems, personnel or financial management, human resources, and/or conflict mediation).

Since leaders who have superb external and internal capacities are rare, it's essential for organizations to be mindful of this *between transitions*, by focusing on ongoing learning and development across roles, practicing transparency and skill sharing, and encouraging collaboration.

Guiding Questions for Funders

Am I trustworthy?

Can the groups I'm interacting with trust me to be straightforward with them, and to walk with them through their changes? Can they trust that I'm

looking for ways to resource them, rather than standing between them and what they need? Am I adding to their momentum, or their workload?

Is my institution trustworthy?

Do we have a set of values that aligns with movements we claim to support? Who does my institution answer to? Can I trust my institution, from the program officers to the board chairs, to take leadership from organizers, people of color, women, and other historically marginalized/attacked populations?

Does our work sustain the current conditions of inequality . . .

Or are we resourcing material shifts that also transform capitalist power dynamics?

Follow those questions into conversations that help you grow.

Emergent Strategy Funding Models

There are many models of emergent strategy in funding—here are a few that I want to uplift:

Auburn Seminary Spiritual Resilience Fellowship: This fellowship was an incredible experience because the Auburn team did their homework, identified movement workers they were excited by, reached out to resource the fellows, and demanded no extra work. The time we were invited to be together was restful retreat and nourishing community time.

Emergent Fund: The structure of this collaborative fund is movement informed, offers a quick turnaround of funds for projects in adaptation, and has a low barrier to entry. This one was actually inspired in part by the book, and it's been incredible to watch it grow and support movements without ego.

Groundswell's Liberation Fund: This fund is advised by leaders who are women of color and trans organizers, guiding funds to groups they know to be effective and who do "whole people organizing."

And, of course, Third Wave Fund: They are currently moving a strategy that is a combo of rapid-response (Mobilize Power Fund) and long-term funding, because it's important to move/respond quickly, but also to sustain organizations for the long haul.

Righting Ego: Four Insights for Radical Organizing

from the Mysterious World of Mushrooms

All of us who are working to build an equitable, just, abundant, and resilient future here on earth have much to learn from mycelia—the fungal network that binds the soil beneath our feet and works as a communication mechanism between trees, other plants, and soil.

Mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of mycelia, and can be used as food, medicine, fuel. They create materials for fashion or home building, they detoxify the soil, and more—we are learning more possibilities all the time.

What impresses me most about mycelia is that the majority of its existence and work is done underground and yet it tangibly contributes to the resilience and well-being of itself and its entire ecosystem. I think humans, and especially those of us who are seeking collaborative justice, have so much to learn from our distant fungal relatives.

How I came to learn about mycelia.

In the past few decades there has been a growing interest in and scholarship of mushrooms and mycelia. And sometimes in this fast-moving world of constant content, we can absorb terminology, and perhaps get only a general idea of something, or just nod along when we hear the word, without really understanding the wealth of knowledge available to us. I am such a fan of the potential wisdom of mycelia that I want to slow down here and explain what I know so far about what we can learn from the fungal world. Mushrooms are the loving correction leaders in the natural world.

I first came to my obsession with mushrooms and mycelia through reading and hearing about the work of Paul Stamets (the American mycologist who has written and edited mushroom scholarship classics including *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World* and *Fantastic Fungi: How Mushrooms Can Heal, Shift Consciousness and Save the Planet*) and Margaret J. Wheatley (whose book, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organization from an Orderly Universe*, encouraged me to look to the world around me for models on how to organize humanity toward more alignment with the earth and each other), and a trip that Movement Generation took me on to California's Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, where I got an early taste of what it might be to

live in partnership with a fecund earth. I also had a sacred experience of eating chanterelle mushrooms harvested on a slow day in Minnesota, and became obsessed with the earthy, healing strength of chaga mushroom tea for my knees.

These encounters aligned with the beginnings of my personal healing journey through the use of medicinal (or psilocybin) mushrooms. The experiences I have with mushrooms are rooted in profound connection, providing a tethering sense that I had imagined and perhaps tasted before. But I never understood it to be a consistent truth I could tap into at any time. In my reading, I saw that mushrooms' gifts to me were aligned with what they do in the world, what fungi do in the world.

I included the wisdom of mushrooms in my book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* and I have continued to study how mycelia works because it feels like such an important teacher for humans in terms of how we need to resource ourselves and communicate in this time.

In what follows, I offer four questions (and possible lessons) that can bring us into closer alignment with the wisdom of mycelia.

What's happening underneath the surface?

Mycelia are made up of millions of miles of thread-like structures called hyphae, which are constantly reaching and spreading themselves and their resources. They communicate messages between trees, warnings about disease in the neighborhood. Yes, some of us, like our mycelia counterparts, are called to be bombastic brief mushrooms on the surface of the world, but so much more is happening in the darkness of rich soil. We can impact the surface, the forest, the health of the entire world with our earnest organic underground labor. Learn from what moves under the earth.

How can we make the world digestible?

Mycelia secrete enzymes that dissolve all of the material that can be food for them, making it possible to absorb the nutrients into their cells. This work of metabolization happens at the tip of each branch of hyphae, concurrently. I believe part of our work is to make sense of the world, for ourselves and for the communities we love who may not have the time and space to process the overwhelming input of the world. Organizers and activists and writers and artists can collaborate to make the world digestible

and comprehensive, to take all the content and process it into action. We can help our folks focus on what is nourishing and possible right before us, even as we make the connections to understand that there are front lines and things to digest everywhere.

How can we strengthen our connections?

Mycelia growing underground actually binds the soil, which is made from the detritus of all that exists. Carrying necessary information along its network, mycelia help to slow and stop the spread of dangerous toxins, and preserve the fundamental life force of the forest. Similarly, by being mindful in our interdependence and communication, we can bind the chaotic content of our lives into a coherent and nourishing foundation for the world to grow. We can warn our communities of potential danger and stop the spread of toxic behaviors and practices in our midst.

Mycelia works in a cyclical, spreading way—cyclical in how it processes the world around it into food and fuel, and spreading in how it is constantly seeking more information and resources under the earth. Reflecting on this motion gives me guidance in my world-shifting work: I cycle lived experiences of injustice and miracle through my system, and then spread to connect with others and communicate what I know, have, and need.

What do we do with the pain?

Death, grief, heartache, betrayal, and other devastation are all part of our human experience. We spend an immense amount of time trying to escape or avoid these inevitable human experiences—one of the most important lessons mycelia can offer us is how to turn and face the toxicity and pain in our world and find life in it. Mycelia see the potential life in everything.

Everything dead and alive goes into the soil and gets processed into life. When we understand that our pain and grief are part of our aliveness, part of how we learn to be, and part of how we contribute to the life of our planet, we can learn to eat everything and make it fuel. We can recycle and upcycle everything, because it is all material, data, content, source. We can make death into life.

Murmurations

Stewarding the Future

My writing is informed by more than two decades of experience as a facilitator of movements for social and environmental justice, and more than four decades of being alive in late-stage racial capitalism and a rapidly expanding climate catastrophe.

Within the last few years, I have stepped back from facilitation to rest, train, make room for other incredible emergent strategy facilitators, make meaning of the patterns I have observed in human behavior, and write.

“Murmurations” is the column I launched with *YES!* magazine in 2022. I was drawn to *YES!* magazine because of its mission: to build a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world through solutions journalism—“rigorous reporting on the positive ways communities respond to social problems.” The writing in *YES!* analyzes the root causes of social problems, and shares models for systemic, structural change.

I wrote on my own for that first year, focusing on accountability—accountability within ourselves, within communities, and within our global ecosystem. These columns are included below.

Not surprisingly, these columns draw from my work and thinking about emergent strategy, the way we get in right relationship with the constant force of change—specifically, how we can build patterns and relationships that can hold our complex natures through relatively simple interactions. They are also informed by my investigations of visionary fiction and radical imagination. I believe we are living in a world dominated by the imaginations of ancestors who didn’t love us, who didn’t believe in an abundant Earth and our collective power to steward it.

My work is also powered by pleasure activism: the belief that justice and liberation must become the most pleasurable experiences we can have, and that we must reclaim the experience of joy and satisfaction for everyone. How do we build the future on a deep yes, a deep longing for what we want? And in the context of practicing loving corrections, what do we mean when we say abolition, accountability, interdependence, community, and liberation?

To answer these questions, I believe we benefit from exploring how the “justice” we mete out interpersonally connects to the ways we treat our own bodies and the planet. For example, let’s consider how we think about

justice for those with less power than us and those with more; justice for babies and children, elders, and species who speak in ways we have not yet learned to understand. Let's also examine hopelessness as a tool for our oppressors. And cynicism and meanness. And capitalism, which nourishes death in all these ways, and many others. How do economic conditions distort our relationships? To survive gender and race constructs, what sacrifices are taken from us? Can everyone learn to be in healthy relationships? Can we learn these things without captivity—by which I mean, without the armed guard under which we currently all live, tithing our overseers? How can we return to a beginner's mind about our species' survival?

Emergent strategy supports these engagements. It includes adaptation with intention, interdependence and decentralization, fractals, nonlinearity, and iteration, resilience through transformative justice, and creating more possibilities. It emphasizes experiential learning, observation of patterns, what to practice, and how to be loyal to the miracle of our lives. The emphasis is also on being more than doing. These are the practices that help us remember we are earthlings, we are of this place, and we can learn to earn our place here by paying attention to the adaptive practices that surround us.

Indeed, as I wrote these columns, I realized that all of my work is about *attention*. Attention is the difference between a life you observe from a distance (sometimes within your own bodymind) and a life you live. And I believe that if we share our observations out loud, we can help each other see patterns—particularly those that counter suffering, predation, and extinction. I deeply believe we can live completely worthwhile lives in contemplation and reflection, or waste it all while working every second of waking life.

My work is also always about *change* and wrestling with how we pivot from being victims of change to shapers of change. I am one of many who has picked up this preoccupation, this question, shared by the Buddha and Octavia E. Butler, among others. And to answer, I suspect we would all benefit from periods of listening and shifting in nuanced but distinct ways, together. Through this stillness and reflection, I believe we increase our freedom, our compatibility with the earth, and our capacity to imagine beyond oppressive, carceral, punishing constructs.

With this spaciousness we can face the children we love, the children in our imaginations, and be more loving and accountable to them, as stewards of their futures. That was the other possible title for this column, you know: “Stewards of the Future.” It’s aspirational. I shamelessly want to cultivate that sensibility in everyone who reads these essays, and this book.

Building a Compassionate Economics

Like many of you, I have spent the past two years in the grip of fear—of the unknown and the worst possible scenarios and real threats—while also managing my desire to control things that are beyond my control. All of this fear and control has been rooted in an inability to accept what is, right now. These years may have been the most capitalist period of my adulthood, and I am just realizing it.

I have cultivated, for my whole adult life, a place in myself that intentionally seeks to understand each person's choices as their own life learning. I strive not to take things personally and to invite people to learn and think, with me or not. I have held a wide space for the divergence of beliefs that shape the future and worked to grow my compassion to be as big as the world and all of its inhabitants. And I have been on the socialist–communist end of the economic spectrum, believing there is some cooperative and collective way of approaching our lives and resources.

Almost two years ago, I set my vast, cultivated compassion on the altar of my normal life, which I'd surely be coming back to soon. I found a hole with an ocean view to hide in, and I bought three months of groceries and all the toilet paper I could see.

I apparently also picked up a narrow compassion, just wide enough for me and mine, my family and friends and people who thought like me. The space I could hold for our human unfolding wasn't prepared for COVID-19. I couldn't extend my love, my care, my understanding, and respect, or even just basic well wishes to those who crossed my six-foot boundary, or who were unmasked, then unvaccinated, then gathering in groups, then unboosted. An "other," an enemy was unleashed in my consciousness: those are "them." They hate the planet and Black people and freedom and the collective good. They deserve the consequences of their own dumb choices.

Even when I started noticing that this "other" included people I loved, I didn't really soften. Even when respected comrades reached out like, "Hey, you seem to be out of alignment with your own beliefs of big diversity and being with difference," I defended myself and called it collectivism. I let my love stay narrow. I couldn't spare my grace for people who didn't even believe in science! I couldn't cast my generous love and compassion on, on . . . them.

At moments, I felt twinges of doubt, but they mostly got swallowed up in quick righteousness. I am grieving people taken by COVID-19, I am fighting to protect my loved ones from those who would risk their lives, I have an autoimmune condition and don't trust that my body can survive COVID-19 exposure, and so on.

I know denying *that which is* is a waste of precious and possibly connective energy. But I was so scared and so angry.

Then Thich Nhat Hanh died.

And I remembered his teachings. I re-immersed myself in the sound of his voice, surrounded myself with his books, let his vast wisdom nudge my tiny balled-up heart.

I remembered that he told us that happiness is in the present moment. And compassion is a necessary component of being present; compassion allows you to gently and honestly understand and love the self, and everyone else, in a state of interbeing. We don't have to try to be connected; we must become mindful to the truth of our existing and constant oneness.

The night I learned of his ascendance, I wept with gratitude for his big heart and generous offerings, and I wept at how narrow my heart had become. I wept at how tightly I was gripping onto life with miserly hands that looked for reasons to draw a boundary.

I am not interested in, nor can I sustain, the binary right–wrong tension of this moment. I don't want to put my energy into these judgments. I am particularly disinterested in how my fear shapes my judgment to be sharp and dismissive of anyone who casts doubt on my choices.

I choose Earth.

I choose the practice of interdependence.

I choose to figure out living on this Earth with the beings who are here, finding the boundaries that allow my love to flow, in the spirit of Prentis Hemphill's wisdom that "boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously."¹⁹

I choose to root into compassion.

My choices are all rooted in my values of compassion, liberation, community, and pleasure for all. As an adult, I have come to understand that the values we hold most dear always carry an economic component.

Movement Generation teaches us that economy simply means the management of home.²⁰ This planet is our home, and our economy is how

we manage the resources and needs of our home, including ourselves both as resources in the stewardship of land, labor, and creativity and as beings with common and distinct needs.

We are living through an age of immense fear—or, more precisely, we are in a postcolonial age in which fear is the most consistent and lingering quality of colonization. We know that this country exists because one European man got lost and others felt persecuted, and the founding of the United States was a toxic dance between displacing and slaughtering so many Indigenous people and then working enslaved people to death to pull a fortune from it. Our economy is based in terror.

And yes, it exists in a true and persistent precarity. At any moment, millions of people on this land could justifiably rise up and declare a war of revenge. When we temporarily rise up against injustice, the first entity the state usually moves to protect is the economy—in the form of property. In the United States, property is more valuable than people, as are corporations. And this entrenched belief props up the right to purchase guns to kill seventeen schoolchildren or nine parishioners, and the ability to evade taxes more easily as you accumulate wealth.

What I know for certain is that humans act from need and belief, most of the time to protect what they love. That knowing always fills me with compassion, even for those I know to be wrong, inhumane, and planet-harming. They speak from a wound as much as I speak from a terror. We live in an economy of wound and terror, collateral damage, greed, and stubbornness.

Not to mention that so many of us are still lost, are, or feel, persecuted, and are still working to encroach on land and labor in violent and unjust ways. Since the founding of the United States, fear has shaped the budget and priorities of our nation and shaped our collective response to any new challenge. The bulk of our budget consistently goes to military and police budgets instead of health care and education, or climate-responsive adaptations.

Fear makes it hard to adapt well, because adaptation requires the release of the familiar to embrace change. Fear can be demoralizing and distorting, or it can be wisdom that is trying to keep us safe. We have not been able to appropriately adapt our collective fear to the wise kind, the kind that quickly turns us to face the true threats of our species in both the current

moment and the immediate future: climate catastrophe, violence at the border of supremacy and oppression exhaustion, and pandemics that expose how interconnected we are despite all that cultivated and resourced hate.

A compassionate economic approach would care not just for the safety of people on Earth right now but also for the generations we hope to bring into a world we are simultaneously attacking and depleting. Even in ideating about a compassionate economy, what fascinates me is how quickly it becomes clear that what would serve the Earth would also serve us. We are one, as Michaela Harrison reminds us.

If we had significantly cut down on air travel a decade or two ago (or at any of the many times the climate-oriented scientific community advised us to do so, because the pollution is so damaging), we would not have been so susceptible to a global airborne pandemic. Conversely, when we stopped traveling and committed (much too briefly) to a local and often quarantined life, the Earth rejoiced in her way, took a deep breath into the spaciousness our absence created.

We don't want to show the Earth she is better without us. So, we must make a shift in our management of home that is both personal and systemic.

For me to imagine how we pivot from a competitive economy to a compassionate one—from capitalism to something in the realm of socialism, collectives, and cooperative economics—I must look at how I let capitalist behavior patterns root so deeply into my own heart, shaping me.

When I feared for my life and that of my loved ones in the bloom of COVID-19, I became a microcosm of the capitalist system: competing to survive, trying to decide in my mind whose lives were most valuable, hoarding resources for myself and those I think of as my people, shopping at places I am not aligned with for the sake of speed and access.

I became ungenerous, tight, scarcity based, narrow, grasping. I even let myself touch into a superiority complex when I read that COVID deniers and anti-vaxxers comprised most of the dead, self-righteously thinking, “We told you so! What did you expect? That you could believe yourself into surviving a virus that is killing everyone?”

I am so sorry. I feel so ashamed. Capitalism benefits from this divisiveness; it allows us to perpetuate a system in which we have to sustain an “other” that we hope to dominate, oppress, deny, steal from, displace, or kill.

We are all at the same edge. We are all on a planet under our attack, stuck in a set of norms that cause harm, trying to survive an overwhelming number of challenges, mostly without the spiritual and interpersonal tools we need. As a species, we have not cultivated enough of a sense of “we,” a “we” that is strong enough for this moment. From business to government to movement, we have not been ready to let go of capitalism and move toward each other.

That is what is right now.

And I don’t know the way forward from what is. I have ideas, theories, and practices. But I don’t know how enough of us become a “we” that can truly be compatible with our planet and each other before we go extinct.

Neither do you, I suspect.

All of this unknown has me scared.

And if I remember that you are also scared, and that being scared makes sense right now, it quiets my petty, defensive, and capitalist-trained self. It allows room for something other than *My Way* to be *The Way* forward. It allows a collective, interbeing, compassionate self to emerge.

With enough of those, enough of us, a new economy becomes inevitable. An economy that allows us to do as Thây taught us, to move softly, and with love, on this home. What you change in yourself and your own life matters: it ripples out through authentic relationships to form a web that can meet the future. I feel us all in this web, I feel us growing it.

19. Prentis Hemphill, @prentishemphill, Instagram, posted April 5, 2021, <https://instagram.com/p/CNSzFO1A21C>.

20. Movement Generation, accessed October 16, 2023, [www .movementgeneration.org](http://www.movementgeneration.org).

Realizing Our Abolitionist Dreams

Many of us have been demanding structural changes: Defund the police! Abolish prisons! And we speak of these massive and amorphous ideas as if they are clear proposals we are ready to roll out. But most of us, even as advocates, don't have a lot of lived experience inside of compassionate and accountable relationships or structures. What I witness most often, even among those of us who claim to be abolitionists, is the longing for a future free of prisons and policing, paired with a tried-and-true practice of punishment and our own versions of social policing.

And before any pedestal formed against me can prosper, I want to be clear that I am not above or beyond this behavior. When situations feel violent, when children I love are endangered, when people in my community are causing harm, I still feel that first instinct to control the situation and clarify a right-wrong binary, and sometimes that instinct goes as far as wanting to dispose of those causing harm. I grew up in the United States (nation and occupied territories) during late-stage racial capitalism; I was trained to be exactly this reductionist and punitive.

But then I began the lifelong journey of decolonization, in which I have slowly and steadily been politicized into alignment with a collaborative, adaptive, healing worldview. I have been on a journey of self-exploration and community exploration: How do we get free? Not just individually, but on a collective level, as a species? Is it possible to free ourselves from the patterns that turn us against our complexity and longevity? What does justice look and feel like in practice? Can it be something we enjoy?

We dream of abolition but to make it real we must understand that every relationship with other people, or with the land we are on, is practice ground. And we need each of these places to practice toward a viable, embodied accountability, one we can rely on under pressure.

Our dreams get fortified each time we move through conflict, misunderstanding, harm, or violence without turning to the carceral state of prisons and policing. Many of us are practicing, learning, and evolving a framework called "transformative justice," or community accountability. Instead of endangering ourselves by engaging the police, who will show up armed with weapons, biases, and quotas distorting their view of what's happening and what's possible, we turn to each other. Instead of responding

to the surface-level symptoms of conflict and misalignment, we reach to the roots, looking for the patterns of systemic and structural impact. We acknowledge we cannot go backward, but we seek a way forward that honors peoples' dignity and capacity to recover, to heal, to reclaim themselves, and possibly to return to each other in new relationships. We release the binary of right and wrong and instead pay attention to the complexity of the situation in front of us: What happened? How can the community support resolution and possibility?

In the interest of moving toward making our abolitionist dreams a reality, I want to share what I've learned about how it looks and feels to be in accountable relationships and structures.

First, these experiences are reality-based. While we may have huge long-term visions of utopian communities, right now, particularly in the US, we live in systems that pit us against each other. So much of the conflict we face is rooted in human-made scarcity and illusions of identity-based supremacy. Rather than hold people to ideals, we invite honest assessments of where and how they are, and what is needed to move forward.

Second, it requires a release of punishment. Mariame Kaba has gorgeous teaching around this. She reminds us that our current carceral system is a 250-year-old experiment in punishment. This system comes directly from the systems by which slavery was enacted and upheld. (I recommend reading *The 1619 Project* and *The New Jim Crow* if this piece of history is new for you.) If punishment worked to end harm, we would know that by now because we have punished more people in more ways than any other Western civilization. Yet within US borders, we have immense injustice, violence, sexual abuse, and unmitigated conflict. Punishment isn't working. Even if you aren't quite ready for abolition, it is time to acknowledge that we need to try other strategies.

Third, accountability is generally a private journey. Sometimes, we think accountability happens with a press release or a hashtag. Those tactics can bring attention to the need for accountability, but the actual processes of being accountable involve slow work, growth work, work to undo and learn and become more self-aware, learning how to make an authentic apology, and being willing to accept appropriate consequences. This doesn't move at the speed of social media, it moves at the speed of one human, changing. Think of things in your life you have been wrong about, mistakes you have

made, beliefs you once held that now seem ignorant to you. Think about how you realized you were mistaken, or caused harm, or were ignorant. How did you change?

And even though it can feel satisfying to demand immediate apologies and changes, what we often get from that approach is performance and punishment. We know punishment doesn't work. And I think most of us would agree that the performative accountability acts—apologies that clearly aren't rooted in true understanding of harm or contrition but rather in shame or public pressure—fall flat, and often leave us deeply unsatisfied. We don't need the performance of accountability, and in our recent cycles of history, what we see is that the absence of authenticity in that performative apology practice actually leads to backlash. People may even go so far as to believe transformative justice and developing a culture of accountability aren't possible, because they haven't felt it. Yet.

Fourth, accountability culture, transformative justice, and abolition are all on the horizon, but we are just beginning the slow movement toward realizing these ideas. We aren't there yet. We aren't even close. Not only do we not know how to take accountability in meaningful ways, but we also don't really know how to feel satisfied by the moves others make to be accountable to us. We often want a fireworks of satisfaction that completely rights the wrongs and erases the wounds. We sometimes show up to these processes thinking we can move backward in time, to the way we were before hurt entered the dynamic. I have mediated so many situations in which one person wanted a total reconciliation, and the other wanted a visceral punishment, and the most satisfying outcome we could land on was clear boundaries and an authentic accounting for harm.

There are some incredible tools available to us now that were not around five, let alone ten years ago. The culture of accountability is growing, even if it feels too small or chaotic right now. Here are some of my go-to tools:

- “How to Give a Genuine Apology,” by Mia Mingus²¹
- *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators*, by Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan²²
- *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, edited by Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha²³

- *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, by Mariame Kaba²⁴
- *An Abolitionist's Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World*, by Patrisse Cullors²⁵
- *Finding Our Way* podcast, hosted by Prentis Hemphill²⁶
- And my own works, *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation* and *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*²⁷

The truth of this moment is that we don't quite know where we are going or exactly how to get there. But we are practicing, and you are invited to practice accountability in every relationship and structure that matters to you. We are growing a muscle to make our dreams of abolition and ending cycles of harm a reality. We are creating a future where accountability is the norm in our culture. This is a very exciting time to be an abolitionist. What are you practicing?

²¹. Mia Mingus, "The Four Parts of Accountability & How to Give a Genuine Apology," *Leaving Evidence*, December 18, 2019, www.leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability.

²². Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators* (Chicago: Project Nia, 2019).

²³. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, eds., *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

²⁴. Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books: 2021).

²⁵. Patrisse Cullors, *An Abolitionist's Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022).

²⁶. Prentis Hemphill, *Finding Our Own Way*, podcast, <https://www.findingourwaypodcast.com>.

²⁷. adrienne maree brown, *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2021), and adrienne maree brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

How to Be Accountable with Your Words

I have been longing for a real world, a true world, an honest world. I suspect our survival as a species depends upon us being able to remember what is real. And so, we must also find language that sheds light on the truth, on the conditions that are unfolding, and on what is.

We are in a period of history where it is difficult to speak and sense the truth. In our twenty-four-hour news cycle, the truth is spun and remixed, dramatized, and tweeted. It can be confusing to determine what stories are real, what stories impact our lives, what is worth our attention, and what, once heard, we are accountable for acting upon. Many of us now find our attention directed by social media trends and algorithms. As I write this piece, there is an incredible direct action unfolding, as scientists around the world lock themselves to the doors of their institutions, begging us to attend to the acute climate catastrophe unfolding. But I am watching that storyline be swallowed by celebrity news and other dramas.

Distraction and redirection have become a field of specialization.

Professionals in every field and political distinction are constantly calculating new ways to manipulate us into making decisions that serve their clients, their values, their politics, and their pockets. This focus-grouped messaging doesn't come with a label, even though it's the GMO of communications.

There is also so much complexity of perspective in how human life unfolds—the reality is that there is no single truth. Context is everything. Power dynamics, cultural experiences, class norms, and age can all radically impact what we understand to be the truth.

And then there's the emotionality of language. I have been guilty of using hyperbolic language when caught up in a moment of anger or despair, language that oversimplifies or outsizes the truth in ways that can either reduce or oversell the narrative of what is actually happening.

So how, in these times, do we “speak truth to power,” as our civil rights ancestor Bayard Rustin encouraged us to do? How do we speak honestly about where and how we are right now, and what we actually need to center in our organizing? How do we learn to “be impeccable with our words,” as Toltec wisdom through Don Miguel Ruiz advises in his outstanding text *The Four Agreements*?²⁸

I want to offer some of what I am learning—as a human, as a facilitator and mediator, and as a writer.

Fact-check everything.

Every source of information isn't equal, especially in the realm of social media. Before passing information along, consider the source. Do they have expertise in a relevant field? Is the information well researched? Does it include the voices of organizers actively working on the issue? What about communities directly impacted by the issue? Is the source a journalistic outlet committed to fact-checking?

Speak as precisely as possible . . .

Especially when sharing information others really need to hear. I remember a poetry teacher telling me to “Write it. Now cut it in half. Now cut in half again.” As a verbose writer in love with words, I struggle with precision of communication. But in both intimate and collective moments of accountability and negotiation, I find it helps to take a deep breath before I speak and to think about what precisely needs to be communicated.

Discern.

Is this the right time for this communication? Is it urgent, or is there time to ask questions and fact-check? If it is urgent—why? Who says so? And who benefits from the information being spread? Do you want them to benefit? Could someone be harmed by that information spreading? Do you want to harm or punish them? Are there other perspectives to consider? What are the potential impacts of this communication? Are those impacts you want to be accountable for?

Speak when we are afraid.

I used to think that if I could not speak without my feelings showing—for instance, speak without a tremor in my voice when I was afraid, or without tears when I felt sad—that I should be quiet, and wait until the emotion passed. But I have been learning that my most powerful words are often accompanied by the release of tears, or the quaking of my gut as fear moves words out of my mouth. When I take the risk of speaking not through or over my emotions but rather in alignment with, or even from, my emotions, I am speaking my truth.

Speak truth that allows other truths. Hold strong boundaries against mistruths, lies, and assumptions.

Not every perspective is equal, nor does every viewpoint deserve to be equally held or considered. None of us holds a definitive truth, and we need to speak with each other in ways that make room for a multitude of experiences. But we must set a standard of not indulging lies and willful mistruths. For instance, any indulgence of denial of the current climate catastrophe is dangerous for us as a species. We need to be clear and consistent in our standards for truth and stop uplifting perspectives that cannot survive a fact-check.

Speak from our own experiences.

We are each responsible for bringing our piece into the great story of our species, which is a long and complex story. Just because something feels true for you doesn't mean it resonates for everyone. Relinquish control of the collective narrative—we are not meant to dictate and control each other. Live into your truth and allow others to live into theirs.

Speak as a body.

One thing that is helping me in my unlearning of dishonesty culture and cultivating the muscles for honest, accountable speech is really listening to my body as I listen to others, and as I communicate. The body is often aware of the gap in integrity, whether it is in another or in us—the space between what's being said and the truth. Start to pay more attention to how your body lets you know that what you are hearing or reading might not be true. I feel it in my belly. I have a good friend whose palms get a little sweaty, and another who feels a twinge in her spine.

Speak what is kind, necessary, and true.

I learned this from Buddhism, and it is one of the simplest and most effective tools for accountable speech that I have ever come across. It only works as a balance. Truth without kindness can veer into cruelty. Truth that is unnecessary can cause harm. Kind speech that is unnecessary or untrue is infantilizing, patronizing, and diminishing the person you speak to.

Necessary truth spoken without kindness can land as a blow that produces a defensive response, rather than an opening for connection and action.

This is just some of what I have learned—and I am still learning. Like

many of you, I suspect, I am not just navigating our current culture of communication confusion but also recovering from cultures of politeness, passive-aggressive speech, repressed truths, and the webs of deceit and distrust woven into many of our cultures.

Commit to using language in ways that shed light. This is a time when we cannot afford to live in the fog of dishonesty. Our future depends on being able to turn and face what is, and being honest about what we are going to do to survive.

28. Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements* (San Rafael, CA: Amber-Allen Publishing), 47.

Accountability Begins Within

Beloved flock in murmuration with me, I keep finding myself saying to myself and anyone who will listen that healing is the victory. Healing from cycles of harm, healing from the inside out, healing so that we have internal integrity to the values most compatible with our beloved home planet and all the other life on it—that's the win.

Seeking to dominate others leads to contention, violence, and a disconnection from reality. No one wins in that scenario. In fact, the most likely outcome of our currently ruptured society is that humans go extinct. And I want us to continue as long as we are meant to, which I believe means breaking cycles of harm.

Internal accountability was required for the necessary changes to occur in my healing journeys around trauma, food, relationships, and giving my body the care and love it deserves and needs. I had to change how I thought about things, what I believed, and what I was willing to practice. I had to learn to see the difference between what I'd been socialized to believe (my fat body is bad and deserving of ridicule and punishment), and what I'd been politicized and liberated into understanding (my fat body is gorgeous, glorious, normal, desirable, and deserving of my attention, care, and worship). I had to learn to be accountable from the inside out, accountable when no one was watching.

I'm still learning.

Who or what do you feel accountable to?

Your community? How do you define that, who is included? Family? Immediate or extended or chosen? Or perhaps friends? People with whom you are unified by identity? People who follow you on the internet? People you work with? The government? A religious institution, or a deity?

And when you feel accountable to them, what does it feel like? How do you know you are being accountable? Has anyone ever said directly to you that you were being accountable, that you seemed like an accountable person?

I ask y'all these questions because I want us to be on close to the same page. I am contemplating the same questions these days, both as a human attempting to live an accountable life, and as someone to whom people often turn when they want to become more accountable.

As I reflect for myself, one of the biggest patterns I notice is that accountability is often discussed as something that lives outside of us. We must be accountable for things we do to others, and things we said we would do that we didn't. We are generally held accountable by others: accountable for harm we have caused, or for patterns of trauma, pain, and abuse that we have participated or been complicit in.

For most of us, it is easier to see accountability as it relates to others, to see their beauty and flaws, to see their victories and missteps, to see ways they seem to be better or worse than us. In this era of internet society, it is especially easy to see what someone else has done wrong, or hear the rumors, and then to talk to them about it publicly. And whether you have ever been publicly held accountable or not, these days it feels like constant pressure, the anticipation of external accountability from the world beyond our own knowing and feeling.

But I think this kind of external living creates in us a collective fragility. If we are constantly tracking each other for things that need accountability, always operating in pursuit of the approval of others, or being held to standards set by others, how can we trust our own choices? If accountability happens outside of us, and is judged and corrected by others, how can we learn to recognize, let alone honor, our own needs, and values?

I suspect that this externalization of accountability, especially the structural outsourcing of accountability from the self or community to the government or religious institutions, is part of what feeds cycles of harm. When we are not able to choose accountable actions on our own, when we are only held accountable once we are caught by another body, many of us can get caught in a state of arrested development, childlike, acting from a place of reckless abandon, instant gratification, and short-term thinking.

When we are stuck in this collective fragility, outsourcing our accountability, we often expect others to do the labor of not harming us, while also not being harmed by us. We are fragile because we are not living with internal clarity around what feels right to us, so we lack the internal capacity to assess the potential harm of each action. Too many of us are living according to an amorphous, highly adaptive, and reductive external standard for accountability. Instead of rooting our choices in what we truly believe and value, we end up making choices that conform to a variety of external values and standards.

I believe it is time to deepen our practices of internal accountability. How do we answer for our own impacts and choices? How do we discern what deserves our attention, what boundaries we honor, what we communicate and how?

I want to focus on this because I think too often we claim a victory based on some external public declaration, campaign win, or shift in social standard. The thinking is: now that we have articulated a commitment to this standard, we have some way to hold others accountable to it.

On one hand, this is true. I am grateful for any external standards against sexual assault and harm, against homophobia, transphobia, racial discrimination, ableism. But these standards alone don't go far enough to address the issues. If we don't cultivate internal accountability, nothing really changes. If I act like I care about equal rights for everyone, but internally I believe I hold a superior position to one group of people, that internal superiority will find a way to surface. I see this often with men who rush to use the language of feminism but still operate in harmfully patriarchal ways behind the scenes—until they get caught. Or white people who have Black Lives Matter signs in their yard but are racist to the Black people in their lives—until they are called out.

If the only thing keeping us accountable is the external call-out, if the only way we choose to be accountable is when we are caught, then we necessarily have to police each other, constantly watching one another for the latest transgression. This is sometimes presented as solidarity, or allyship, and you can feel when the correction or lesson comes with a sense of humility and compassion. But more and more often, especially in the public sphere, what we are up to is not solidarity but mass policing. The subject of our policing is determined by which issues we are willing to surveil.

Part of truly learning a lesson is the embodiment of it, knowing it from within, knowing it so deeply that it can guide your next choices and decisions. What we have learned to do really well is police each other. We are in a constant state of division, conquered by those who benefit from our inability to think collectively and structurally.

So, a first step toward ending cycles of harm, toward deep healing of some of the systemic wounds we carry, is honing our internal sense of accountability. Not “let me be careful not to offend” or “let me do this

messed up thing and hope I don't get caught," but "let me act in alignment with my values."

Returning to the Whole

“What time is it on the clock of the world?”

My mentor Grace Lee Boggs used to ask this question all the time, to anyone who came to visit and learn with her, in any meeting she attended, in every speech she gave. She wanted us—her students, comrades, and community—to keep a wide, long lens about our work. To remember, all of the time, that this moment is not the only moment. Human development moves in these massive cycles and phases, and there are always agents of change who ideate and practice and push and grow those shifts. She reminded us that there are changes available to us that are distinct to this time, and she urged us to be present to the opportunities that are current. She knew that we are not individuals simply living these solitary lives in a vacuum. We are the cells of our time-body, the collective physical body of this moment, interacting with each other and the earth and technology in ways that will create an age.

Grace also said, “We must transform ourselves to transform the world,” which has taken me years to understand and embody. The way I think of it now is in the framework of the imagination battle: there is a war going on for the future—it is cultural, ideological, economic, and spiritual. And as in any war, there is a front line, a place where the action is urgent, where the battle will be won or lost. The world, the values of the world, are shaped by the choices each of us makes. Which means my thinking, my actions, my relationships, and my life create a front line for the possibilities of the entire species. Each one of us is an individual practice ground for what the whole can or cannot do, will or will not do.

Grace visits me with the insistent memory of her words. I see her speaking them with her hands cupping the future in front of her, spirit teaching.

So, I put these two wisdoms in direct relationship with each other more and more often these days: given the time on the clock of the world, how do we need to transform ourselves to transform the world? How do we need to be? How do we need to grow ourselves to both spark and cultivate the kinds of species’ evolutions we want to see? What do we need to practice?

This, to me, is the work of internal accountability. We are cultivating within ourselves a transformative practice that helps us heal from what the

world has been, while generating what the world will be.

We must become accountable to our time, our Earth, our species, our people, and our loved ones, from the inside out.

One of the first steps we can take toward generating internal accountability is to **develop an assessment of why the world is as it is**. This requires us to leap from the uninformed faith we have in the societal myths we were given as children, to the informed faith that we need to co-create the real world as adults. This informed faith is based not on cultural myths but instead on lived experience, political education, and analysis. And this informed faith can allow us to embark on the right assessment, which then helps us find the balance between understanding the systems that have most deeply shaped us, and the responsibility we have over our own lives, choices, and impacts.

We live (and die) inside of systems that were imagined centuries ago by those ambitious and narrow minds of colonists and patriarchs. We live inside the lineage of relatively ignorant imaginations, which were obsessed with protection and domination. But we know so much more now. We know each other's pain and complexity now; we know we are one interconnected ecosystem—so far, the only planetary development specifically like us.

Some of us know there is no supremacy among us as a species. Some of us know humans aren't meant to be the center of creation. In the same way we had to evolve our thinking from the sun orbiting Earth to the more humbling truth that we are one of many planets orbiting the sun, we must remember (or learn) that the Earth is not designed only for us humans to consume and destroy. We must recognize it is meant to serve all the biodiverse species who walk and fly and swim here.

Speaking of other species, my friend Michaela Harrison is a whale singer, who goes down to Brazil, into the water. She sings to the whales, and they sing back, and she feels and listens. And they told her, quite clearly, "We are one," which both deeply resonates with me and challenges me. The idea that I belong to one whole thing sometimes feels too vast.

The fragmentation that has resulted from colonial constructs of race, gender, class, and power has wounded many of us so deeply that we identify more with the wound than with any experience of wholeness or oneness. Because we identify with the wound, we fight against each other over differences that don't need to be battles. We opt into these constructs,

often without conscious choice.

I feel my mind sometimes splitting and labeling my whole self into smaller and smaller boxes because I have always been labeled out of others' boxes. I am tired of hurting and splitting and shrinking myself, and tired of requiring that from anyone else, tired of all the violence required in the denial of self and the denial of biodiversity.

The assessment I form after laying all this knowledge down on a page is that I am accountable for shifting massive systems, and one of the most important ways I can be accountable in the grandest sense is by being intentional and radical in how I behave, what I believe, and what I practice.

A second practice toward internal accountability is to **recognize that you have healing to do**, given the conditions and legacies you were born into. There is healing related to how your people have suffered, and healing related to how your people have created suffering for others. As a multiracial person, I can immediately reach the healing work needed on both sides of that coin in the family trees that I am aware of. But even for the many of us who cannot access our full history—because our lineage has been lost, stolen, or erased—I would say that an honest assessment would reveal that all of us have caused harm, some of which has been systematized and sustained. And all of us need healing in our lives. Recognize that the healing need is a universal one and tell yourself the truth about your parts of that.

Next, **identify what healing means to you, what it feels like within you**. I believe healing is the victory that actually moves us beyond oppression. And that healing isn't a fixed state but rather an embodied state that is cultivated with ongoing practice. If you've been developed as a traumatized, numb, selfish, or harmful person, healing is evidenced when, under pressure, you are able to stay connected, stay present, stay interdependent, and be accountable for harm.

For me, working with an embodiment framework through a somatic lens has most helped me feel healing, rather than just think about healing. I feel the presence of my healing work when what I feel within is totally aligned with what I am expressing and practicing externally, socially. I know I am in healing dynamics with others when I can fully be myself, without feeling pressure to wound myself with contortion, dishonesty, or overextension. How do you know when you feel healing in yourself, and in your

relationships?

Ultimately, internal accountability is about moving from fragility to fortitude, from within. You are not a set of constructs easily destroyed, you are a whole being inside of a whole ecosystem, and you are healing. You can be intentional about directing your energy's flow to the places and memories that will be most healing to the deepest wounds within you. The answer to Grace's question is that now is the time to heal our systemic wounds.

Love Looks Like Accountability

We create the patterns of our society through our choices and beliefs and practices. As such, the path to a future in which humans can be in an authentic and accountable peace with each other is fractal—we must be willing to practice authenticity and accountability at the small scale of ourselves and our lives, both in ourselves and in our immediate relationships.

Right now, we are living in the pattern of excess—capitalism creates excess wealth and poverty. It also shapes us toward constant wanting and consumption, instead of being shaped to know what is enough, and how to feel satisfaction. In this age of excess, it is easy to see our relationships with others as transactional, temporary, and disposable. Racialized capitalism, in particular, trains us to expect that some people fall through the cracks into unjust suffering; our cultural individualism tells us this is acceptable, as long as we aren't the ones at the bottom.

As a model of humanity, this one is failing us, hurtling us toward extinction.

If we hope to save our species, and to have human life on this planet, we must learn from within how to live lives of satisfaction. We must practice how to move from a deep, sated, and respectful relationship to ourselves—in which we honestly articulate our needs and generate compassion for our choices—into a deep, satisfiable, and respectful relationship to anyone else.

If we hope to strengthen the net of our society, we need to strengthen the bonds between each pair and group of individuals. What we want is a net so strong, so satisfying, that no one can fall through it. A healed society would be one in which no one becomes the bearer of unjust hardship, where individuals don't bear the weight of systemic failures. There is a degree of loss and pain that is a part of the human experience, but we can heal our relations to each other to move toward a reality in which no one is given a life that only produces trauma and suffering.

This may sound like an intellectual or solely internal process, but the truth is, this is our collective work; this is what healing and accountability look like. And there are practices for weaving and trusting that net.

Be responsible for your internal state, and the external impacts you might have on others.

It's intentional that we think about internal accountability as a solo practice. So much of being in relationship with another is about being able to have deep awareness of what it is we want and need in a given moment, and what we're feeling—be it safety, or vigilance.

This can be immensely uncomfortable. We might be feeling some combination of vulnerable, insecure, scared, disrespected, angry, or other emotions that we aren't always raised to hold with dignity. If we can't be aware of—and responsible for—our own feelings, then anyone else we are relating to can easily become a site of our projections or unharnessed energy. We can have negative and harmful impacts we do not intend.

Trauma and toxic patterns trickle outward, viral. Even small misalignments within can create ripples that change the culture of a whole community. What begins as a wound in one person can move like a sharp knife through a friendship, romance, workplace, family, or community.

The good news is that accountable practices can be just as contagious. The more we can take accountability for our own feelings and impacts, the more we invite others to handle their own needs and feelings, which makes way for interdependence. Center, journal your emotional state, ground yourself by taking a deep breath; discover or develop a practice you can count on that helps you assess how you feel, not for the sake of controlling those emotions, but for the sake of honest communication.²⁹ Be transparent with others about what those centering and grounding practices are for you.

Build relationships, not assumptions.

The way our societal constructs are set up, many of us believe we are the labels that have been assigned to us by those who seek to oppress and control us. Without any intention, we internalize these constructs and begin to see others as a collection of preconceived ideas, labels by which we may assign worth. By the time we are beginning to deepen into relationship with others, our assumptions may have created a whole set of hurdles that make it difficult to actually relate.

Be in a practice of curiosity as often as possible when entering into and developing relationships with others. Let yourself be surprised by the person in front of you, rather than constantly comparing them to limited colonial ideas of what their race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, or other constructed stereotype is cast to be like.

Speak and listen with intention.

The world we are creating is going to require us to have some hard conversations, and many of us struggle with this skill that, ideally, should be fundamental. Have you ever found yourself lost in a monologue when you wanted to be in dialogue? Or on the receiving end of a diatribe or rant when you needed a real conversation?

We want to be at ease and authentic in all of our communications, as we want to fundamentally be ourselves at all times. We also want to be intentional in what we express, with the understanding that our words cast spells over each other; our words weave a story of who we are and will be to each other. So much of the harm we cause each other happens through reckless speech.

When we are centered or grounded before we speak, it can help us stay connected in a conversation. For the record, you can be centered and still be messy, incoherent, anxious, upset, all the feelings. The difference is that you are actually aware of your emotional state and can thus be responsible for what you speak and share in that state.

Pay attention to how you feel before, during, and after your speaking. Interrupt yourself if you've lost your way. Give others permission to help you have a sense of time as you speak, to interject gently if it's going long, or invite you to share more if you tend toward the shorter side of communications.

Give and receive feedback.

As we do our individual, internal work, we may come up with wonderful ideas about who we are, how we are. But that doesn't mean that internal concept of self is how we're actually showing up or being received. Asking for feedback from those around us can help us understand if we are aligning our behaviors and impacts with our intentions.

Many of us also think we can read each other's minds and naturally intuit everything about how to be in relationships with each other. This can be true for children; I am often amazed watching child strangers fall into functional play patterns with each other. The stakes are pretty low, the focus on play is shared, and there's an ease with both moving into connection and letting it go if it isn't working.

As adults, we need to be willing to fine-tune our relationships, and to

learn with each other—to learn how our energy and expression lands on the other person, and to share how theirs lands on us. This doesn't have to be a constant process, but I am always amazed at how much conflict is avoided with timely, direct, loving feedback. It is a gift to give someone a chance to shift their behavior and create more possibilities within the connection.

Set, hear, and honor boundaries.

I love the Hemphill Method for boundaries: Prentis Hemphill says, “boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously.”³⁰ In every relationship, there is a need for boundaries. Only you can know what your own boundaries are, and you are responsible for articulating them. The people you are in relationship with are responsible for honoring these boundaries, and letting you know theirs.

Boundaries are one of the places we can grasp compatibility, which is as important in work, family, and platonic relationships as it is in romantic connections. If the boundaries you need can't be honored by someone? Or if you can't honor the boundaries someone else has set? That means y'all aren't compatible, and you might need to let the relationship go. There are so many humans out there, and some of them will easily honor your boundaries. With those who can't honor boundaries while in direct contact, you might have to upgrade the boundary to one where there is minimal to no contact.

That's also love.

Apologize and receive apologies.

We are blessed to live in a world where Mia Mingus has already given us a beautiful guideline around making apologies that truly acknowledge the harm that was done, the impact we have had on one another, how we will make things right, and how we will ensure that we don't repeat that harm.³¹

Our relationships benefit when we can apologize whenever we realize we have caused harm, whether that happens through our own reflection, through the impacted person letting us know what's happened, or through others in our community helping us see where we need to be accountable.

With our apologies, we won't always know what the other person needs for accountability. Don't be afraid to ask. And be honest with yourself about how accountable you can be.

It's also important to be able to receive an apology. We don't want to rush and accept something that doesn't actually touch into the wound, but we do want to be available to other people's accountability. Receiving an apology and the accountability measures of another person is a sacred act. This is an act that affirms that people can change.

Accepting another's apology doesn't mean you owe them an ongoing relationship, or access to cause more harm. But receiving an apology also means being willing to set down any need to punish the other, to hold their behaviors over their head as if they aren't accountable.

Apologies can take a long time to learn and to land, but to build accountable relationships, we must know how to give and receive apologies.

Know when to hold on and when to let go.

Earlier, I mentioned compatibility. I want to testify for a moment on how powerful it is to lean into the relationships where you have the most compatibility and quickly let go of those relationships that lack compatibility.

We live in an abundant world, a world with nearly eight billion people alive at the same time. And yet we limit ourselves—we get into dysfunctional relationships and structures and commit to suffering for life. The truth is, every adult relationship is a choice. We choose to nourish a connection, we choose to work through conflict, we chose to stay . . . We can also choose to go. If the default setting of the relationship is conflict, if there are deep value differences that make the connection a constant struggle, if the rate of growth and change between people is uncomfortably different, it's okay to let go.

Invest your precious life force into relationships where you feel seen, respected, cared for, challenged, grown, accepted as you are, and loved.

Follow the love, proliferate love.

Yes, this writing is about accountability, but my real goal at all times is to help us learn to love ourselves and each other. I know the blessing of loving myself, my coworkers and collaborators, my family, my friends—it feels like some of the most important political work of my life, weaving networks of love and care among my loved ones.

Love is how humans flock; love is how we murmurate. Among the masses, we find our people, figure out the right distance, and then we change together, and we thrive.

Being accountable is how we can come to truly love ourselves and give and receive love from others. Being accountable in our most intimate relationships creates the pattern of societal accountability.

29. Prentis Hemphill, @prentishemphill, “Quick centering practice for anybody activated during takeover of capitol building,” Instagram video, January 6, 2021, www.instagram.com/tv/CJt4MSCgfPU/. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Meditation,” Alexis Pauline Gumbs, accessed October 16, 2023, www.alexispauline.com/meditation.

30. Prentis Hemphill, @prentishemphill, “Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously,” Instagram photo, April 5, 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CNSzFO1A21C/.

31. Mia Mingus, “The Four Parts of Accountability & How to Give a Genuine Apology,” *Leaving Evidence*, December 18, 2019, www.leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability.

Breaking Is a Part of Healing

I was in a conversation recently with a friend who had just returned from a meditation retreat. She said one of the ideas shared with her group was that “the teacup is already broken,” a meditation on how the death or ending or brokenness we fear is inevitable. We will die, everyone we love will die, the organization will end, the nation will come apart, the system will collapse. The teacup will break. The end has already happened in our minds, our imaginations, our predictions; it is implied by the very pattern of our existence, which we understand to be impermanent.

I find that this idea brings me as much peace as does the idea of healing as a victory. These ideas might even be the same idea. They are variations on completion, though our society tends to lionize one form (healing) while fearing the other (rupture). I want to offer you the peace that is inside this connection between completion, accountability, and community—but to get there might feel a bit scary, because we must talk about endings.

The material world is necessarily temporary, and it is only a matter of how deep we are willing to look, how far into the past and future we are willing to consider, to understand this. If you don’t believe me, look at the ruins of every society that has predated us on this planet. Remember that the matter that makes up our moon and planet is the dust of stars exploding in other galaxies. Remember that we can be partially made of stardust only because stars die.

Death is a nonnegotiable aspect of the pattern of life for most creatures we are aware of. (With the exception of immortal jellyfish, tardigrades, and turtles who don’t come across humans.)³² Humans and most species we have encountered on Earth—and even most celestial bodies—have a life cycle that includes death.

If death is, as many of us believe, the portal to a vibrant spiritual realm, then death itself would seem to be fed by life as much as it feeds the cycle of life. In some variations of this belief, in death we become part of the whole again, relinquishing our individuality. In other variations, we are able to both maintain some specific aspects of ourselves in an ancestral identity, while also being part of a larger spiritual existence that can be felt by (and is somewhat concerned with) those still living.

In a reincarnation worldview, death is the door to a waiting room where

our spirits rest before re-entering the life cycle. But there are also those who believe that this life is the total experience, that death is completion, followed only by the decomposition of the material body back into the earth. The souls that follow us, the babies that come through us, are also on a one-way journey through a life that has a material end.

We can have faith in one of these beliefs over the others, but so far, we cannot have a scientific certainty beyond faith. We have stories of people who have had near-death experiences and made their way back; many of them speak of a light they move toward, some see family and loved ones beckoning to them, some speak of feeling an incredible peace and falling into darkness. When I hear these stories, I always wonder how much of the experience is shaped by the faith of the person having the experience. If you believe in heaven, does death present as a white light or a cloud full of loved ones? If you believe in nirvana, do you experience peace? If you believe there is nothing after, does death present as slipping into the dark?

And what if you don't really think about this at all? What if, from the time you are born, you are given a story of your life in which you don't really need to be accountable? In which you don't have to decide for yourself what death is, what life is, and what your soul is up to?

Our spiritual work is, at its heart, finding a sacred peace in the present, which will change, and which will end. I want to explore how our spiritual practices and beliefs around death interact with the work we must do here on Earth. My intention is not to judge, insult, or dismiss any particular way of believing, navigating faith, or being in the world. But I do think we need to accept death as a part of the life cycle, and deconstruct the concept of heaven or any form of future utopia if humanity is going to continue to exist here, now, and into the future. Our spiritual work is, at its heart, finding a sacred peace in the present, which will change, and which will end.

I am ruminating on all of this because, for me, the reality that I will die is a component of how I approach accountability day to day. I accept that my singular life is not everlasting, and that I have a mysterious timeline in which to have this particular human experience. I have thought and felt a lot about my spiritual responsibility in this life and concluded that I don't want to spend time on causing or perpetuating harm. I want my lifetime to be part of an evolution toward ending unnecessary harm and suffering for my species and planet.

I was raised with a concept of heaven as something that came after this life, a utopia that I had to be “good” on Earth to deserve. The oldest story I ever heard was of a vengeful, violent God who would punish and shame and erase his people, who then eventually sent his only son down to suffer for our sins, blanketing us in a conditional forgiveness that, if we followed the rules, would grant us access to eternal heaven. I know a lot of different belief systems likewise envision some sort of punitive divine force and embrace the sacrifice of an innocent in exchange for a blessing. Ursula K. Le Guin has a short story called “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” about this kind of setup: a child who lives in constant suffering as the cost of utopia.

I was very young when I started to pull at the threads of the story. In the same way I slowly outgrew the delightful carrot-stick mythology of Santa Claus, I have slowly outgrown the idea of a punitive God waiting in a future heaven, and that my access to eternal peace and joy is predicated on my Earthly behavior.

That story felt and feels like a narrative for people who want to judge but not be judged, who want peace without the rigor of practice, who want heaven without having to change how they live in any significant way. That feels like the opposite of accountability to me.

I know a lot of people for whom this or some other story of God or gods and goddesses makes sense and provides meaning. I feel the holiness in these people, in their rituals and practices. Many of the rituals—lighting candles, letting aspects of nature represent divine material, asking for divine support and shaping of our lives—align with my own witchy practices of the present.

But I always notice the contradictions between what people say they believe, their perceived proximity to heaven, utopia, or peace, and what they do. I particularly notice the growing alignment between wreaking havoc on Earth and using the idea of a delayed, merit-based utopia to claim a moral high ground. Driving to the beach here in North Carolina recently, I was surrounded by flags with AR-15s in the stars and stripes print of the United States, with the words “Jesus” and “Trump” framing the weapon. Some of these flags were in front of small houses of worship.

My grandfather was a Christian evangelical man. He rode hard for Jesus, and the assignment he received from studying Jesus was humility, attending

to those who were suffering, and noticing the humanity in the houseless and the sex worker and the sinner. He lived in one place most of his life, and he stewarded that land and all the creatures on it. And they loved him: he would walk into a field and swiftly be surrounded by horses and dogs, and sometimes I think even the birds would follow him around singing. His holiness was unquestionable to me, and as I get older, I respect more and more the way he understood that his assignment was to love this planet and all that lived on it.

There is necessary adaptation in the sacred stories we tell, in the holy structures we build, and in the values we practice with each other. My grandfather was given fire and brimstone, and then a compassionate and forgiving savior who washed the feet of those others called dirty, evil, disposable. He made choices to live his faith as a continuous act of love.

My sense of a spiritual connective tissue between all that exists is nourished by the deep knowing that my grandfather and I are both people imbued with a holy calling, guided by love and compassion, even if those paths look so different as to appear oppositional. This sense inspires me to cultivate curiosity for what is different from me, mysterious to me. My humility in the face of the biodiversity of our world is woven from the same fabric as my humility in the face of what I call the divine. I sense that there is infinite complexity beyond my comprehension that is unfolding in all of our choices.

This has been heightened by my growing sense of preciousness for the Earth itself. For life itself. For the present moment itself. I no longer assume that human life is the peak of divine creativity or purpose. There is something about the multitude of ways of being that is itself holy and worth our steady embodiment and fierce protection.

I think that we must reawaken our collective wonder for life, and respect for death, if we hope to shift the course of our species on this planet. Especially in those who currently espouse a life led by faith but are engaged in practices of destruction, oppression, patriarchy, rape culture, and other toxic and perpetual harm. But I wonder if we must also be willing to bring heaven, nirvana, peace, rebirth, and even death into the way we think about accountability every day.

If the ultimate accounting for our lives lies solely in the hands of a divine figure who has already handled it all, there is no real incentive to stretch

and grow and become a human who can be in relationship with everyone else who is here, now. Likewise, if we are destined to spend eternity on another plane of existence, where do we find the motivation to steward the planet we live on, making sure that humans can be in a positive relationship with our home? If there's nothing but this life, how do we generate our accountability to all the life that will follow us?

Many of us know it is time to seek the completion—or death—of our collective experiments with racialized capitalism, with ecological hubris, and with human supremacy. What is harder to discuss, but growing more necessary daily, is challenging destructive worldviews where they show up in our spaces of divine collective practice. If our places of spiritual community, our houses of worship, cannot adapt beyond regressive, harmful worldviews, we risk losing the divine gift of human life on Earth.

But if we can look at these gifts of divine story as emergent ways of speaking of the life cycle, and the inevitable change and death that accompanies all existence, there is a peace available right now. These systems of oppression will inevitably fall. The structures that are not compatible with life on Earth will end. Our spiritual work is either shaking the foundations of injustice, or letting go of our reliance on anything that results from oppression. The teacup is already broken.

When the teacup breaks, we see how that particular tea was never for us, leaving us the holy lessons of mindfulness, intention, deeper presence. Our temporary and cyclical work is to notice what is broken, clean up the dangerous fragments of the past, and let them go—or remake them into something beautiful, and then begin again.

32. “Biological Immortality,” *Wikipedia*, accessed October 16, 2023, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biological_immortality; <https://www.rd.com/list/animals-that-live-forever>.

Accountable to Earth

I love sitting with mothers in moments of relaxation. I was recently on vacation with some of my goddess crew, one of whom is a new mom. Her baby was sleeping in the next room, and after a bit of time and talk, we heard the sound of his voice, carried in stereo through the door and the little monitor that let us see and hear him.

To be honest, anytime he wasn't with us, we were watching the little monitor, watching him sleep, dream, move around, self-soothe. My friend sat up, alert, and held up a hand to remind herself (and us) to give him a minute to see if he needed her or was just cycling up to the surface of wakefulness before diving into the next dream. He dove, and we went back to what we were doing. An hour later, he cried out again, louder, demanding, fully awake. She moved quickly to hold him, knowing his needs with the incredible grace of a good parent.

Later, I thought I heard him again, but he was awake, and it was an owl hooting deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the pitch of the hoot moving up, up, up the scale, and into the moonlight. Another time, it was a cat nearby, mewling for attention. I was reading a book about a talking cat, and for a moment, fiction and fantasy merged as I felt certain I knew what the cat meant: Now, now, now! The baby, the owl, the cat—they all sounded the same to me, each crying out for attention, for care, in a language that translates across species.

This pattern of screaming prayer returns me to a familiar question: How do we hear beyond the human cry for help?

The Earth seems to be crying. I hear the concurrent calls of one-third of Pakistan underwater in massive floods; Jackson, Mississippi, without water for drinking or toilet flushing for the foreseeable future; Puerto Rico's power grid flooded out by Hurricane Fiona. And that suffering barely scratches the surface. There are fires that never rest into ash, there is water that doesn't recede, waves where we need ice, islands whose highest point is now below water, heat waves that send elders into grocery store aisles while chefs cook steak on the hoods of cars.³³ On the recent anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, I noticed how normalized these disasters have become; how comfortable we are becoming with mass displacement and death.

What would it look like to answer the demanding cries of Earth, to be

accountable to the needs of the planet? Given that these questions are likely already familiar to the readers of this publication, perhaps we need to ask something different: Can those of us willing to be accountable do enough to counter the choices of those bent on destruction? How?

Over this past year, I have been experimenting with a climate ban on unnecessary travel. I don't fly for work or speeches. If I am in transit, it is for love only: going to family, blood or chosen; going to home; going to health. If it's within reach and my body is up for it, I drive my electric vehicle to get there.

I've mostly been able to hold this practice, and it has felt like a choice that helps ease my impact on the Earth, while also easing the impact that travel and being away from the sanctuary of home has on my body. I am feeling myself more every day as an earthling, understanding how what is good for my body is good for the Earth, and vice versa.

Another practice I'm interested in is folding the Earth into every other thing I do, every decision I make. When I consider any concern I have for people, place, animal, culture, danger, I root myself back to the relationship to our Earth and the changes currently unfolding for her. What would the Earth have me do, have us do?

These questions bring me to this brief but powerful wisdom from Margaret Killjoy: "You can't write fiction on a dead planet." ³⁴I think the same is true for everything, far beyond fiction. If the planet effectively dies for us, if it becomes uninhabitable for humans, nothing else we are doing here matters. So many of us have cried this out, in so many ways, for so long—I know I am adding my voice to an ancient wailing, for attention. For care.

If every issue was seen through an Earth-related lens, what might we learn? We wouldn't put down our myriad priorities, but maybe we would reframe and redistribute our time to more accurately account for the care of our only home, currently crumbling and buckling, infested, and burning and flooding in every room. Our home, too, is wailing.

But imagine for a moment that everyone was tapped into this pattern of accountability to the planet, of anchoring our actions in consideration of their impact on the Earth. Imagine a common reality of collectively prioritizing our most universal gift: life on Earth. Imagine, for instance, a movement-wide, Earth-forward ban on work travel, and a shared

commitment to turn our global attention to the wisdom and need of the Earth beneath our feet and over our heads, flowing all around us.

Imagine what we could do together if our movements were focused on sustainability or, even better, sustenance—that which sustains us, that which answers the cry for care. What if movement's job was to hone the parental instinct of our species? I am not suggesting here that the Earth needs us to parent it in terms of a power dynamic, but rather that there is something communal and universal in the need and offer for care among the species that share this planet. There is a rhythm to care that flows in every direction. Rather than centering a human purpose of domination and forcing the Earth to serve us, imagine if we centered in a human purpose of care, among and beyond our species.

As I write this, my friend Michaela Harrison is off the coast of Bahia, on a boat, leaning out over the front prow and singing at the top of her range. From miles around, whales come to her, spending the afternoon singing to her, with her, circling her boat in chorus and conference. She recently gave me some highlights on an Instagram live, and in addition to the message “We are one,” which she has shared from her whale comrades before, this time, she said it was clear one message was “We will rule.”³⁵

Harrison is singing and whispering and translating, and it will take some time to understand the meaning of these messages. But as I reflect on this larger practice of listening to the Earth's cries for our attention, it occurs to me that this message could be as much a promise or comfort as a warning or threat. And yet, whales ruling wouldn't have to come from conflict. Just being a water mammal on a drowning world would yield a definitive superiority.

But I also hear something softer, ancient, parental: “We will be here. We will take charge. We can be trusted with this place, even if you can't.”

This is a time of overwhelming change. We must do more than we have capacity to do, on too many fronts to count. The key is for each of us to do all we can, to add our voices to the planetary scream for responsive attention. For care.

If we can do that, then perhaps all we have left is to trust that our respite, balm, and collective care will scoop us out of this mess. Or the work of crying will teach us to be so tender with our collective self that we are finally able to mother all that mothers us. And listen to all the wisdom of

the world that seeks to reach us.

Lately it feels like ancestors are talking to me all the time.

I think this is good news. For most of my life I have been told what my ancestors have done so that I might live, so that I may experience freedom and voting and vacation days and peanut butter and other joys now. I try not to place my ancestors on a universal pedestal, to remember that they, too, were flawed and perfectly imperfect humans. But I do think they have the wisdom of death, which I hope is, at minimum, a liberating lens.

There are, of course, my familial ancestors, of which the vast majority are unknown to me—not only their personalities, but also their names. They exist in my mind and heart as stories and songs and memories. They offer instructions that I can feel myself wanting and needing.

And I am fortunate to experience the continued blessings of some of my ancestors who are known to me. My Papa (maternal grandfather) and my (paternal) Grandma Brown feel present with me in a steady and ongoing way, distinct energies of the same generation. They lived their entire lives two hours apart, but never met—unable to cross a social distance that was, at that time, galactic.

And I have always felt my work to be in collaboration with specific ancestors, those whose blood may not course through my veins, but who have helped shape me and the work I am called to do, nonetheless. I feel responsible for uplifting and continuing the work of Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, James Baldwin, Frida Kahlo, and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

I had the privilege of sharing space and time with some of the ancestors in the lineage of my work: I met Octavia Butler before I was twenty years old; I saw Nina Simone wield a peacock feather and piano in concert at twenty-one; I was able to sit with both Ursula K. Le Guin and bell hooks in my thirties, reveling in the brief and delightful moments where the ships of our lives crossed paths. And, of course, there is Grace Lee Boggs, whom I got to befriend and neighbor in Detroit during the last eight years of her life.

As I explore accountability within this column, I find myself wondering how, exactly, can I be accountable to my blood and chosen ancestors? How can we be accountable to those who lived and died before us?

The answer to this question feels most clear in the context of my ongoing relationship with those ancestors I met, saw, touched, and was held by. I

know what they approved and disapproved of in me when they lived, so I can extrapolate some sense of their opinions on my life now, although I suspect that in the portal from life to beyond life, the limiting beliefs, and phobias that some of us carry can fall away as we return to being part of something whole.

I sometimes feel my Papa's hands on my shoulders, see my Grandma Brown's smile on my face, hear the shape of Grace's excitement about an idea. There are times when I am thinking about a character, and I clearly hear a voice of critical development that feels like Octavia. I am grateful for even the slight possibility of specific ancestors who care for me, who watch over me.

Simultaneously, I hope these ancestors, in their current planes of existence, don't actually spend their cosmic energy intervening in the petty business of humans. But perhaps the guidance I have felt from these ancestors is part of our shared connection to a collective whole, much greater than any individual, time, or place. Perhaps our ancestors are connected to us by the threads, transformed but not broken, in that portal between life and what's beyond it. For the ancestors I love, this thought is comforting. I want them to feel free and remembered, honored, and needed.

What feels less clear to me is what to do with all the ancestors I never met, whose legacies flow through my life even if their blood doesn't (to my knowledge) flow through my veins. I have such an extravagance of lineages that it sometimes amuses me, just imagining them all in a space with each other that grows more global and rebellious with each addition.

And thinking about that space shared by all the ancestors I do and do not know, I find myself grappling with a more challenging question: What about being accountable to ancestors who believed in things I don't believe in? What does it mean to honor all our ancestors, including some who colonized, some who share responsibility for creating the mess we humans find ourselves in today?

I often feel this unspoken hesitation when I am in rooms of mixed cultural heritage, when we are invited to call our ancestors into the room. A flitter of questions across the brow: Are you sure? Even *my* ancestors? Even the ones who messed everything up?

My answer to that hesitation is that our ancestors are already in these rooms with us because we are there. But I suspect that the ancestral

accountability we need, in more cases than we want to admit, is to continue to learn the lessons, continue to course-correct their mistakes and limited beliefs, without negating the long arc of our young species. I think about the things I grew up believing that now seem ignorant to me. This thought floods me with humility about how fast we can learn in times of change.

To be accountable to my ancestors who were racist, homophobic, colonizers, capitalists, to those who killed and raped and stole land and people, to those who lied and robbed and hurt children and manipulated partners and generated systems of punishment, I live my life not in denial of all this complexity, but as an evolution from those harmful, dehumanizing, and traumatizing worldviews.

There is a saying that has been popular in the past few years: “I am my ancestors’ wildest dream.” I love this idea, and I have put seeds in that soil. I love that it highlights those ancestors that dreamed of their own liberation and of their successors.

But there are also, in my lineage, ancestors for whom I am likely their worst nightmare. A Black, queer, pansexual, poly-curious, unmarried, childless, defiant, feminist, post-capitalist Earth lover, constantly thinking about what might be the most revolutionary next step I could take. Yes, I know there are ancestors who would feel they had failed in their work because I exist.

But what I know, which these ancestors may have some sense of now, is that the impulse to dominate, and control, and harm, and deny the truth of divergent human experiences is rooted in self-loathing. There is something in those fear-based, scarce, damaging worldviews that is a fundamental rejection of the miracle of life. So many of the systems my ancestors survived are structural, systematized self-loathing.

I have to honor that those ancestors lived in a time of less knowing, less connectedness, and less possibility. I have to honor that their lives are crucial to my callings. I pass my current experiences of freedom and delight back to the ancestors who did not have access to rest, or agency over their time. I pass my current experiences of self-love and radical self-acceptance back to my ancestors who thought they could only belong through some version of destruction, of themselves and others.

These rituals, along with those that help me listen to my ancestors through tarot and prayer and writing, are ways I keep growing my

accountability to all who came before me.

Stepping outside is another practice of ancestral accountability for me. I know in a scientific, tangible way that ancestors fill the land, are part of the dirt and the air and the water. Everyone who ever lived and died is buried or burned or otherwise deconstructed back into the matter of this world. These ancestors existed, and in the same way the matter of their bodies is part of the earth, the things they thought—their mistakes, their ignorance, their curiosity, their experimentation, their complicity, and their brilliance—are what fills the world today.

Many of the conflicts we are currently embroiled in are rooted in ancestral misunderstandings. We are trying to break the future out of cages some of our ancestors constructed, and we are still caught in the power dynamics of ancestral beliefs of worth and destiny. Being accountable to the unknown lives—the foolish, the wrong-headed, the ignorant, the lives that caused harm—helps me have more space for those I see living those ways even now. Human experience is not designed for perfection, or only loving those just like us. I think this is why we experience blood and cultural relations before those we choose—we are connected. We are experimenting across time, to see if humans can find a way to belong to each other and our world. Our ancestors teach us what to do and what not to do if we are accountable to their teachings.

33. South China Morning Post, “Elderly Chinese ‘Chill Out’ in Air-Conditioned Supermarket to Beat the Heat,” YouTube, August 23, 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=MML_XeR7CiM; “A Japanese chef has used his car to cook a slab of meat,” VICE News (@vicenews), Tiktok, August 31, 2022, www.tiktok.com/@vicenews/video/7138067536695872774.

34. Dominic Walsh, “Margaret Killjoy Talks Power’s Nature and Her Writing Influences,” *SciFi Pulse*, Sept. 7, 2022, <https://www.scifipulse.net/margaret-killjoy-talks-powers-nature-and-her-writing-influences>.

35. adrienne maree brown (@adriennemareebrown) and Michaela Harrison (@realmichaelaharrison), “I was so blessed to have this conversation,” Instagram video, August 30, 2022, www.instagram.com/tv/Ch5XSSOJbcy.

Accountable Endings

We are at the end of a world. Again. Which means we are at the beginning of a new one. Again.

In the world that is ending, identity-based superiority has reigned, and it has shaped everything. White people enslaved Africans, men enslaved women, and anyone who didn't fit into the colonial capitalist heteropatriarchy—because they were disabled, or queer, or trans, or not a citizen, or didn't fit into the “subservient” role they were cast into—were punished, locked away, or killed.

We are in a long arc of releasing that world in myriad ways: protesting it, opting out, critiquing and ridiculing it, developing analyses to help see how it works, educating each other. In this way, we change culture and assumptions and structures a bit every day. But because the shift is gradual and occurs while we still exist in a world where regressive values manifest in pervasive and unique ways, it can feel like we are not the spark of change. Even as we divest from power structures that are predicated on the denial of any group's humanity, the pace of our evolution and the ongoing struggles, the backlash, and the egregious acts of continuing harm can make it feel like nothing is really changing.

One of the ways I recognize how much is changing, and how rapidly, is by thinking back to the culture of my twenties (I am forty-four now), and then the culture of my childhood. With this longer lens, I can see how much is changing, how rapidly the changes are coming, and sometimes I can even see where my generation has shaped those changes—about what was legal, spoken, sold, or normalized—which now shape the present culture. When I see both the impact of ancestral and elder organizing, and the impact of our organizing and culture-shifting, it makes me feel even more accountable for what comes next. This era is for visionary death doulas with time-traveling presence, able to stand in this moment full of embodied wisdom from our lived and ancestral experiences, and ripe with possibilities and practices for a future that is nourishing for all of us. Being accountable in this moment includes a few key activities and perspectives:

Notice where dying ideas show up in your life.

We have all been inundated with the colonial, capitalist, heteronormative,

and patriarchal ideas that this dying world inflicts upon us. Interrogate these ideas as they arise. Ask yourself if any of them actually feel true and compelling to you. One hint that they don't is when you find yourself in structures of obligation, imbalanced care, constant sacrifice, or perpetual frustration. These dying ideas might also show up in massive meltdowns of spaces that ought to be commons, such as what we've all watched with Twitter's demise. When those still clinging to antiquated power structures and mythologies (like money signaling brilliance) steal your agency, time, ideas, labor, or straight up displace you from your (physical, cultural, or ideological) home, learn to recognize the desperate grasps of a power structure that is dying. Find the opportunity to grow beyond their reach.

Notice collective denial.

We are living in a global pandemic with a virus that has long-lasting and debilitating impacts if it doesn't kill you. Those who survive are reshaped by the virus, some in overt ways we currently call long COVID, some in ways that don't show until there's a sudden death months later. We also don't know what COVID will do to the generation of children we forced back into schooling conditions where they could not truly protect themselves—let alone the ever-growing number of children orphaned by the virus.

And yet, we now board planes and traverse a world full of unmasked, unprotected people—because our government supports the capitalist-fueled rejection of necessary COVID adaptations. Precautions that save lives, that protect the disabled and immunocompromised among us, aren't lucrative. Taking even the smallest, simplest step toward community care—like consistently wearing a mask—now feels like swimming upstream, or shouting a political stance, even as people continue dying from a virus that keeps spawning new variations.

Our society has approached climate change the same way: adaptations only seem to move where they can be monetized. But denying reality doesn't work as a long-term solution. The fires are burning; the hurricanes are knocking out neglected, unprepared infrastructure; the droughts and floods are swallowing nations; and nonhuman species are disappearing in the sixth great extinction of our planet, caused primarily by our human impact on the planetary living conditions. All while COVID-19 is still

slipping people out of this life.

Notice collective experiences.

The pandemic has changed us in other ways too. The amount of grief we carry is a collective weight. The way everyone is having to figure out safety on their own has increased distress and overwhelm. And it has hurt relationships—trying to be close to people who navigate boundaries differently can be tense at best, and dangerous at worst.

We are, perhaps, more aware now of how much everyone is carrying, if we are letting that information in. COVID and climate catastrophe aren't the only things we are surviving as the systems we've been socialized into become obsolete and explicitly regressive all around us. How can we move through this period of endings, this Anthropocene, with grace, rigor, and curiosity?

Slow down and embrace awe.

When I slow down and tune into the world around me, there is so much wonder available to me. If I am terrified, combative, or try to dominate the beyond-human nature around me, I get stung; I feel disconnected and hopeless. But if I slow down and lean into the experience of being of one species among many, I experience so much mutual curiosity, and I feel so much awe at the marvel of our collective existence, even in this moment of upheaval.

A worker bee was curious about me recently, and rather than panic, I got curious. She buzzed powerfully around my crown, and I felt wonder as that small and mighty buzzing moved down my body. She landed in my hair, and as she stepped around, I felt wonder at how small her body was, and whether her legs were narrower than the strands of my hair. I wondered how I smelled to the bee, what she found on my surface.

A seven-legged spider was curious about me shortly after the bee. I felt something moving on my face and instead of swatting, I got slow. I drifted my finger softly along my cheek toward the temple, and there she was, now moving along my fingertip, leaving web in her wake. I spoke to her, wanting the hum of my voice to show that I intended no harm. She climbed from finger to finger, hand to hand, stopping often to just sit there. I felt wonder, watching her move, watching her choose to stay with me rather

than move to the concrete, glass, and canvas surfaces I offered her.

I worry that the world, which can abundantly care for us and for which we have found no replacement, is going to become uninhabitable to us and so many other species because we choose to live such contentious and distracted lives. We humans have made so many decisions that separate our species from the natural order, and thereby from curiosity and wonder about the world around us. Watching how biodiversity—and our chance of survival—has decreased as our wonder has dwindled and been confined inside fences, buildings, and screens, I can't fight the urge welling up inside me to rekindle our wonder about all that is still living and changing on Earth, even now.

It is too late to sidestep the crises that arise from the tech-utopian, false-solution futures that capitalism has predicted and promised, but perhaps, and I daresay I hope, that it is not too late to have a future in which our species is here and living in right relationship with the Earth and the other survivors of our palest age.

Solstice and Equinox Spells

A Winter Solstice Spell

tucked into
stargazing wonder
we arrive so quickly to the
night of the longest moon

we too
are rock moving water
even when we feel adrift
we are in orbit
there is a force greater
than we can comprehend
we are enraptured
from the root
and never alone
even in shadow you hold us

and we sing a song
only the ocean can hear
sometimes it sounds like
we are sorry

or
we are dying
but sometimes
we sing
we are of you, we are of you
we are one³⁶

we sing to the thumbprint of moon
ink on ink
shadow slipping through the cloudy cold
of winter
we sing
of breaking the earth's heart
and realizing it is our own
we sing forgiveness

we sing of the fire
between skin and dirt
the rivers within us
the storms we conjure
before we sleep

tonight we dream our longest dream
of the farthest future
we look in those children's faces
without regret
without shame
whispering: we will change everything for you

it is because of these dreams
that we will remember
to hibernate
to slow down to the pace of snow
to feed on the memories
of a year we call good
because we survived it

we place our mouths to the sky
and cast this spell

may we all have a warm place
may we all have a soft blanket
may we all hold a steaming cup in our hands
may we all know a sated belly
may we all have a shoulder for our grief
may we all set down what we cannot bear
may we all be unhunted

may we all remember we are sacred
may we all touch our bodies in worship
may we all have room enough to stumble
as we dance to the moonlight's subtle music

we dose this enchantment
with our holy intentions

and in this taste of eternal darkness
may we honor all that is black, and shadow
in ourselves, and in the world
may we crawl into the cave
carved especially for this season
and hear nothing but the quiet of stone
may we know, without question
that there is time for our rest
may we remember surrender
touching the dirt that holds our ancestors
and our futures
with reverence

and in this way
may we all know the love of earth

36. This line comes from the whales of Bahia, via Michaela Harrison.

A Spell for the Spring Equinox

Let us remind the world
How many shades of green there are
How, together, we look like life itself
How tender the dirt gets in spring

Let us burst open, one multitudinous bud
Unfurled by that internal pressure of petal
Ripe, yes, and soft
You will learn to inhale us

Let us punch up from the earth, a lava
Bright and abundant dreams of tomorrow
Flowing molten and free
Turning ignorance to ash

Let us act like we got some roots
Know that we are held deeply
Even as we dance towards the golden breast of the sun
life delectable again

Let us remind ourselves
That life moves ever towards life
This is the season of our nectar
Beloveds, this is the season worth the sting

A Summer Solstice Spell

Wartime

frolic

cavort across

fields that hold

labor and bones

lovemaking and laughter

and each of you

black with joy

jit and jive

the frontmost line

is everywhere now

but we still alive

we carry our dead

in our eyes

crying out: it's summer

find the bullet beat

percussive pace

duck and cover

exhausted pulse

flinging forward

only your softest

parts

relinquish ahistorical safety

hysterical corrections

and hyperbolic declarations

all wars are internal

but remember

summer is a good time

for revolution

so mirrordance

see the light

in your own eyes

on the longest day
heal, or go down swinging
swallow your own shadow
and, whole, rejoice

A Spell for the Fall Equinox

the nights stretch themselves
over our harried hearts
there's no differentiation now
each day we come apart
in new ways
at old seams
we age on the edge of crises
we thought were hyperbolic
til they knocked upon our door

one answer to the chaos
is hibernation
one answer to the fire
is snow

let us carve out caverns
for our rest now
howl down the dust and let
no harm come as we sleep
lay naked
and huddled
the truth is forever muddled
the fools took the future hostage
but we are seed and spore

one answer to death
is a haunting
one gift of each harvest
is more

let your leaves fall down
and sing to your ghosts
nourish life with everything
you release

ours is not the only life on earth
nor the only death

let your altars hold the earth
and the sky, and sea

it is time to gather and grieve
time to listen and pray
time to find the cave that
curves against our spines

shorten every work day
to catch the brief sun
be bare under softest blanket
dream of pumpkin, root and pine

the half earth grows dark
inviting you to rest
the hungry earth needs the dreams
that only come with depth.

A Final Winter Solstice Spell

aim for clean snow and pure water
air that smells of pine and sweetgrass
dirt you can eat
fire that burns with purpose
let the city be a place
we care for as we traverse it
let the country remember wildness
remember how to breathe amongst the living
let the concept of billion die
bury it in gold and linen
next to scarcity, under greed
only a shared world can rest
love, melt on our tongues
memory, flood our palms of grief
this year has stripped us bare
how can a year feel so brief
we have done enough
let it be, this is our best
you have done so much
you need rest, deep rest

Conclusion: From Fragility to Fortitude

Movement is not the center of revolution, but the doula to it. We must be able to see and hear the revolutionary capacity of people anywhere.

We must build an internal sense of movement and justice that fortifies us and sustains our resilience and strength.

This is a time to be brave in our learning, and in our interventions.

This may be the last time my primary intended audience are active in movements for social and environmental change. I wrote some of these essays while embedded in this world, and some from a distance, more orbital. All come from a place of deep longing.

I have been reflecting on what I learned as a full-time movement worker, and what I am now learning as an artist and a writer dedicated to changing this world of ours—still feeling my roots in the soil of movement, even as I take new forms of flight. What I see is that my deepest longing is to shift our collective ways of being from fragility to fortitude.

When I speak of movement, I am including those of us who live with the wisdom that a better world is possible through our collective actions, our organizing and outreach, and our practices. I believe movement is meant to be a ground solid enough for people to step on to and feel the future, feel at home, and to feel welcomed, compelled, and engaged. Ideally, movement is not the center of revolution, but the doula to it. I believe movement can—and should—embody futures that course-correct for the current worlds we are immersed in, and invite our best selves to flourish.

Our collective revolutionary practice, then, must include the eradication of the unjust worlds that live *within and between us*.

It takes strength to let go of what harms us. One of the gifts of fractal thinking is that it allows us to see how the lessons we learn in our individual lives reveal what we need to understand collectively. For instance, I have had to extract myself from bad relationships more times than I'm proud of. I've said yes to outdated romantic offerings, which framed "love" through a lens of control or limitation. I am writing a book on love, but I can share here that through these lenses, love was a construct of fundamental compromise—as well as unspoken commitments to lie to each other—as we contorted to "make things work."

I can see how these small, private relationships were frontlines for me, sites where I participated in scarcity thinking, competition, and unnecessary suffering that kept me disempowered and distracted from freedom. I can also see how my current practices of love—staying rooted in cooperation, honesty, boundaries generated for the sake of freedom, and being transparent about who I am and what I need—feel like planting seeds of the worlds I want within me.

To get to a new way of being, I have had to be *brave enough to break my own heart* (quoting Cheryl Strayed) every time it took on an outdated shape, in the name of connection. I didn't see this when I was in the middle of it, but now I understand that I was trying to build and remain in a "caterpillar house," instead of surrendering to the goop that would allow my evolution into my butterfly nature. The caterpillar and butterfly are true forms—one is not better than the other—but the need to grow and change is inevitable. I believe the human species is meant to make drastic transformations and adaptations, such as moving from walking to flying; from battle to having ease in our connections; from isolation to existing interdependently; and from struggling to taking on shapes that allow our survival and our wonder.

These metamorphoses are not for the fragile or fainthearted. To break one's own patterns down, to enter the space of truly not knowing what to do differently and surrendering to that, becoming not "nothing" but rather something entirely foreign, something unrecognizable, and perhaps not even truly visible to the past self . . . This is miraculous work that requires strength, repetition, and practice. And, unlike the caterpillar and butterfly, humans require mindfulness to change so drastically. Before most of us surrender, we must first grow tired of having our faces in the dirt, and weary of our fatal games of dominance. We must grow tired of self-proclaimed fragility and recognize that we can change, that we must change to keep living.

What do I mean by self-proclaimed fragility? I am trying to point to the tendency within movements that I have watched fester and spread over the last two decades—a tendency toward complaint without solution, toward building a repetitive narrative of what is wrong. Similarly, we focus on each other's mistakes and misalignments instead of devising ways to collaborate, to support each other's unlearning and growth, and to be accountable for what happens in shared spaces.

Too often I have witnessed people participating in movements in ways that increase our collective fragility, make movement spaces volatile and reactive, and keep collective attention on surface-level flaws and the weaknesses of the oppressed. Too often, we have not spent enough energy to extract oppressive roots within ourselves, and within our shared spaces. This is deep, entrenched, and necessary labor.

This is not to say that our internal accountability is not important—it absolutely is. In fact, authentic internal accountability is a nonnegotiable part of this freedom work, because so many of the systems that oppress us do so by using our own minds against us. These systems make us believe we deserve to suffer, overwork, go without, and believe, in some way, in our inferiority.

One of our current patterns is to demand accountability from others, accountability that we are unwilling to demand of ourselves. Or we demand accountability in performative ways that actually weaken our collective work. This isn't easy to talk about, because one element of fragility can be immense defensiveness. I want to reach past that defensiveness, past our parts that are scared to set our fragility down. I want us to resist the habit of attacking those who are closest. In my opinion, we often make these moves to avoid feeling humbled by the massive scale of the opposition we actually face.

Movement fragility occurs when we want accountability or action that is beyond our current capacity, and/or when we believe we cannot change, and/or when we want accountability without relationship. Fragility occurs when we are in movement formations that rely on our collaborative effort, but we spend the majority of our time pointing out each other's shortcomings and failures or building blaming narratives about others—especially about those who risk stepping into leadership. We make our own formations and structures shaky because we are not willing to engage in the depth of honest communication and relationship that allows fortification.

We must be able to see and hear the revolutionary capacity of people anywhere, to uplift the good in each person trying to make this world more just. This means hearing people who we might see as a bit behind us in their analytical development, and it includes people who may not agree with us on every issue. We can struggle with each other, but we must be mindful not to get caught in *patterns* of struggle while our oppressors take note,

celebrate, and accumulate more power.

We must build an internal sense of movement and justice that fortifies our resilience and strength. This is a time to be brave in our learning and our interventions.

As you finish reading this book, here are some questions for moving from fragility to fortitude:

Am I complaining or focusing on limitations (my own or others) as a form of procrastination?

What am I committed to changing in this lifetime? Is my current work aligned with that commitment?

Which relationships in my life matter to me? How can I fortify those relationships?

Do I trust myself to learn from my mistakes?

And some practices:

Meditation, meditation, meditation.

There are so many ways to meditate—your way might be sitting in awareness, walking, yoga nidra, or something else. But meditation is a way to learn to be in relationship with your mind, rather than trapped within your mind.

Mediation.

Small to large-scale mediation helps tend to the raw edges of fragility. Having someone hold a conversation, referred to in my book, *Holding Change*, as “kitchen table mediation” can help people hear each other, find alignment, and clarify boundaries.

Boundaries!

Everyone isn’t meant to do the same thing in the same way in the same space with the same beliefs. Boundaries allow us to find the right distance from everything else on earth for our brief lifetimes. Boundaries keep us from wasting our precious lives. And knowing what lanes are yours can help you really let go of trying to control people in *their* lanes. I can testify to the fortifying power of strong boundaries to support my clear sense of what I am not here to do, and to protect the time, energy, and focus I need to

answer my actual calling.

Truth telling.

Learn to speak the truth, learn to hear it, learn to honor that there are many truths, and become allergic to anything that isn't the truth. Cause we live in the real world, my loves.

I hope that everything in this book lands with the loving energy I poured into it. These are all lessons and corrections I have learned the hard way and learned in relationship. What persists in me is the spirit of curiosity, the desire to keep learning how to be human, with you.

Afterword

by Janine de Novais

“Healing is a school. Everything we learn along the way is meant to be shared widely.”

—Chani Nicholas

Loving Corrections. My first thought is, why didn’t she say “revisions” or even “critiques”?

I worry people will bristle at the severity associated with the word “corrections.” I worry that people, especially those socialized in the context-collapsed, ego-drunk world of social media, will fear the word. I worry that they will reject the discomfort but then I remember that the discomfort, and how to become resilient to it, is the point. adrienne sees humans, herself included, through a lens that is equal parts exacting and exalting. She sees the flaws, and she sees that we can learn to fly and soar beyond greed, hatred, and delusions of heteronormative and transphobic patriarchy, racial capitalism, ableism, climate violence, settler colonialism, and imperialism, beyond the meanness through which these delusions structure daily lives.

When adrienne reminds us that “healing is the victory,” I take that as an encouragement to reap our healing-victories along the way, so we can be nourished. How do we craft freedom from unfreedom, craft “happy pockets” amid despair, and lovingly correct course? By changing. But change is hard because it is loss. Even lovingly, a correction means trading the hard-fought safety of an idea, the tether to our story, for uncertainty. Everywhere authoritarian monsters are raging and growing, it is because they are feeding on fear of change.

The profound discomfort a loving correction brings, whether on a small or global scale, is integral to our functioning. The cold or sweaty palms, the profuse sweat or dry mouth, the heart racing, or the voice quaking, all of it is a stress response. Paradoxically, this stress response, in a healthy dose, is what sparks learning. When you seek to integrate new information, in order to stop that discomfort that it brings, you are learning. Our beautiful brains panic whether the discomfort is “the saber-toothed tiger is chasing me” or “I have to rethink my stance on Palestine.” Luckily for us, nature, “the great

teacher,” has gifted us a superpower: we can craft ideal conditions around us that defuse that stress, that make loving corrections possible. In both saber-toothed tiger times and our time, ideal conditions are the same: we need people. We need people around us to journey with, and learn about the world with. The quality of our human relationships and communities constitutes the grounding for our resilience for change.

One of the friendships “not rooted in panic” in her life that adrienne mentioned is with me. We call each other “neighbor” for two reasons. One is basic. We long for a time when we will be actual neighbors who can meet on the porch at the end of the day. Since we’re not there yet, we are manifesting this dream so it can come true. The second reason came to me whilst in a silent meditation retreat when I first learned of one of my favorite Buddhist stories or suttas.³⁷ In it, the Buddha’s beloved disciple, Ananda—the Gayle to his Oprah and the Julius to his Beyoncé—asks the Buddha to check if he understands the role of friends in the Eightfold Path (put simply, the path is the practice of being in right relationship with all beings).

Ananda asks, “Blessed One, are you saying that admirable friendship and admirable companionship is half of the holy life?”

The Buddha replies: “Don’t say that, Ananda. . . . Admirable friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life.”

This is a twenty-five-hundred-year-old insight into the kind of animal we are, a social animal for whom meaning-making in community is like food and water. The moment I heard this story, sitting quietly with one hundred yogis listening to our teachers, adrienne appeared in my mind as the admirable friend who helps create the condition for me to wheather becoming myself, with integrity, with grace, and with courage. The one who will not judge me because I will not judge her. She was so clearly present that I almost forgot to relay the story to her afterward. I felt she’d been there to hear it with me. She is, in fact, almost always there to hear me.

Be generous in your pursuit of good friends on your path of loving corrections and radical imagination. Give yourself a community who loves you enough to risk losing you to help you grow. Find and cherish those mirror-friends who witness your worth when you cannot, and who in your silent darkneses, can reach inside your heart and ring that bell. The

operative word in loving corrections is loving.

37. “Upaddha Sutta: Half (of the Holy Life),” trans. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, retrieved from <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.002.than.html#fn-1>.

Thank you!

Thank you to my family and my inner circle for holding me and loving me. Thank you to Jodie Tonita, Mariana Silva, freddie blooms, Hope Mohr, Caitlin Breedlove, Jess Pinkham, Kenny Me and Sarah Gonzales from Allied Media Projects, Kung Li Sun, Susan Raffo, micha cardenas, Karl Kumodzi, Maceo Paisley, Zach and Suzanne and the entire AK Team, Brenda Hernandez, Nandi Comer and the Allied Media Projects SEEDS program, Monica Odom, Shabnam Banerjee-McFarland, Jessica Lanyadoo, Chani Nicholas, Naimonu James, Shonali Saha, Becca Wender, Kat Aaron, Larisa Sharifi, Abigail and Shaun Bengson, Spenta Kandawalla, Hala Alyan, Suheir Hammad, Sunder Ganglani, Kent Barrow, Zachary Rosen, Morgan Bassichis, Anohni, Kerri Kelly, Jane Riosecco, Michaela Harrison, Lorelei Williams, Bridgit Antionette Evans, Rupa Balasubramanian, and the Pop Culture Collective for crucial support, guidance, inspiration, intervention, and collaboration in this crucial moment of my own life correction.

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Loving Corrections

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This edition © AK Press

ISBN: 978-1-849-35554-4 (paper)

ISBN: 978-1-849-35513-1 (e-book)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023948676

AK Press

370 Ryan Ave. #100

Chico, CA 95973

www.akpress.org

akpress@akpress.org

AK Press

33 Tower St.

Edinburgh EH6 7BN

Scotland

www.akuk.com

akuk@akpress.org

Letters from Ursula Le Guin in “Celebrating Ursula, and Her Loving Corrections” are included with permission of the University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives.

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Cover design by Herb Thornby

Illustrations in the “Righting Imagination” chapter by Hester Tittmann

Printed in the USA on acid-free paper

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