



Relationship: The CourageRISE Model for Building Relational Cultures of Practice

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ICAN'T BREATHE.” The last words of Eric Garner as he was suffocated by a NY police officer’s chokehold summarize the impacts of the crises in which we find ourselves today. Millions of pairs of lungs afflicted by SARS-COVID 19 struggle to breathe. Smoke from unprecedented expanses of raging wildfires fill the air while plastics strangle marine wildlife. By all measures the global immune system is ablaze due to a toxic disregard for balance, reflecting the long-term impacts of the elevation of property and wealth over a reverence for life itself.

As thousands of activists have emphasized, the burden of the devastation falls directly and disproportionately on the shoulders of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Time and again the least valued lives are feminine-of-center, queer, darker skinned, less able-bodied, and so on. The sharp contrast of whose lives were lost and whose livelihoods were destroyed over the past year demonstrate the continued vitality of white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalist systems and the depths to which the human psyche has been successfully colonized by the logic of dominance-based social structures.

At the same time, resistance to injustice, unfettered joy, and the spirit of kinship are ever present. The hallmarks of humanity—creativity, cooperation, and compassion—abound; people are building and strengthening mutual aid networks to support and sustain one another, making music from a social distance, dancing in the streets to reclaim them from the violence; creating new technologies and rituals in order to connect, and showing up to march toward collective freedom. Humankind is ignited by the tension between a competitive, scarcity mindset embedded in the logic of capitalism and the conviction

that not only are our lives dependent upon one another, but that we are stronger together.

Beyond this binary is the question of how our ideologies will evolve to regain a sustainable balance across the planet and all her peoples: rock, plant, insect and animal. In this essay, we explore one model for supporting this paradigm shift toward sustainability: CourageRISE. After briefly reviewing the toxic elements of the current dominant paradigm structuring society, we detail our model for sustaining the structural changes that may prevent ecological collapse.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

The forces that converged to create the dualist logic of domination were not inevitable. While the assumption that humankind is naturally inclined toward violence and competition and that self-interest predominates the western imagination, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy and others have argued that our ability to caretake and make sacrifices on behalf of our community have been key to our survival as a species.¹ Indeed, pre-European contact, millions of people indigenous to the Americas lived in a variety of technologically advanced, rich civilizations with thriving democracies and cooperative cross-national relationships despite conflict over resources and, at times, competing cultural norms.² What many of these varied civilizations shared, however, was a relational viewpoint. The relational paradigm posits that all things exist in relationship, as the conditions of possibility for life and liberation.³ This relational paradigm once predominated on the European continent, as well.

Look beyond the veil of colonization and we find that when people do not orient to land as a resource to be owned, they revere it. Far from representing a relic from the past, this interconnected, relational philosophy is alive and well among the many peoples who have resisted the press of colonization to this day. Indeed, a deeply relational paradigm is not an exception to the rule of human-supremacy thinking; it is endemic across cultural geographies. Evidence of the relational worldview can be found across the globe, from Heraclitus in ancient Greece to Laozi in ancient China. Destruction of relational worldviews and indoctrination within a dualistic Christian paradigm have always been key tactics of colonization. Conquerors have decisively punished the expression of alternative belief systems as heresy via inquisitions, executions, and boarding schools. Among colonized peoples that have been fully assimilated into the colonizing paradigm, acknowledging this loss of lineage and culture is an important act of truth and reconciliation. It is essential to the work of reclaiming the parts of humanity long denied in order to fit into prescribed

boxes of acceptability. Similarly, among those who have resisted the forces of colonization, uplifting and affirming the inherent strengths, wisdoms and value of these traditions are powerful acts for rooting out the internalization of colonizer belief systems.

RelationSHIFT: Building our relational muscles until they (re)define culture

Systems of oppression live in our minds, bodies, and cultures. They are reproduced through hegemonic narratives, codified through institutional policies, and inscribed into our DNA⁴ via interpersonal relations and behavior.

Strategy, political action, or legislation alone have been insufficient for bringing about lasting change. The challenge is that we are very well trained in maintaining the status quo and without great vigilance and practice, we typically replicate dominant patterns. To develop social structures that reflect the inherent value of all life, significant internal and inter-personal shifts must accompany systemic changes. We have to practice new ways of being—new cultures—that help us embody alternative systems. We can't simply legislate—or meditate—our way forward.

Part of the work of shifting a dominant paradigm is to center alternatives already present while rooting out the structures that protect the current system from transformation. The good news is that the relational paradigm lives within existing systems of exploitation. Capitalism has always depended upon caring and cooperative relationships among all peoples—plants, animals, and humans—to reproduce the labor and resources it freely exploits to sustain itself. We collaborate. We cooperate. We common. We provide mutual aid, we invest in restorative justice, we herald the spread of transformative justice, and we experiment with regenerative cultures.

The current paradigm caused harm by tearing apart relationships to our ancestral lands, to our immediate family, to extended family, and with other living and nonliving beings on this planet. Accordingly, we are inspired by the many lineages of healing that advocate for the restoration of community as foundational to liberation. Although the degree of suffering is unevenly distributed, the current social regime has damaged us all in subtle and gross ways.⁵ Just like all healing requires loving attention and access to steady resources, mainstreaming an alternate paradigm will entail disrupting unconscious explanatory frameworks, replacing subtle system-protecting mechanisms with life affirming ones, developing new habits of culture and most importantly, truly opening ourselves up to be changed.

Opening the self to transformation requires reevaluating one's place in the scheme of things and accepting responsibility for one's ability to cause great harm while remaining worthy of love and redemption. It requires broadening one's circle of concern to include those once thought of as enemies or as simply a means to an end and learning to cherish them as deserving of our compassion and as contributors to our awakening. It requires softening around the pain that arises instead of fleeing from its awareness. It requires allowing oneself to be seen as one actually is and not as one wishes to be. It also requires changing the nature of relationships and systems so that they support such transformation. Suffice it to say that transformation ultimately requires a considerable amount of courage in a world that resists change.

A Framework for Building Relational Cultures of Practice

"I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end of that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community... and this will require a qualitative change in our soul, as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The approach we describe here is rooted in the many wisdom lineages and collaboratively developed by a community of practice that expands well beyond this article's list of authors. This approach weaves together somatic, trauma-informed, healing-centered, relational practices designed to foster the stamina necessary for engaging in authentic community building across positionality, faith and age cohort. As the reader will note in the sections to follow, this model is inspired by Tibetan Buddhism, nondualistic Shaivism, contemplative science, human development and family studies, anthropology, gender and women's studies, evolutionary psychology, liberatory and ancestral knowledge. Captured by the acronym CourageRISE, our five-part process is designed to provide a balance of qualities deemed essential by many wisdom lineages: the ability to be open and soft, yet firm and fierce when needed; to see what is with clear eyes and sense that which is unseen, and to discern when it is time to lead and when it is time to follow when embarking on new pathways.

This five-part model grounds in practices that organize the autonomic nervous system in a calm and connected pattern by invoking an awareness of security, connection, and care. We call this first part courage (with its latin

root “cor” or heart) because softening our hearts to the possibility of change is a terrifying and necessary first step to manifesting change. In addition to cultivating and evoking the resolve and sense of support needed to face painful truths, the grounding practices introduced in this first part are what sustain the effort to RISE:

1. (R)eveal truths;
2. (I)nvest in healing;
3. (S)ense alternatives; and
4. (E)nact Beloved Community.

Below we describe each part of the framework as pathways of practice. The model itself is iterative and non-linear, though there are certain scaffolds that support the deeper work of building community. We offer this as one framework for supporting the shift toward a relational paradigm. Over the last six years, our team at Courage of Care⁶ has shared and iterated this model with thousands of healers, facilitators, activists, organizers, and social service professionals who are committed to tending to the relational tissue of our movements for justice and liberation. We have partnered with numerous universities, school districts, human rights organizations, trauma clinics, healthcare centers, sustainability think-tanks, spiritual communities and political movements. Because CourageRISE is a framework and not a set curriculum, we believe it offers opportunities for mutual collaboration and adaptation.

Courage

“Resistance to oppression is often based on a love that leads us to value ourselves, and leads us to hope for more than the established cultural system is willing to grant... such love is far more energizing than guilt, duty, or self-sacrifice. Love for others leads us to accept accountability (in contrast to feeling guilt) and motivates our search for ways to end our complicity with structures of oppression. Solidarity does not require self-sacrifice, but an enlargement of the self to include community with others.”⁷

Sharon Welch

Softening our sense of separation is the goal and the path. Our model begins with training in building and reclaiming relationships. As so many disciplines have demonstrated, responsive and consistent sources of care are essential for supporting us in times of stress. Relational training builds the skills needed to build collective power and develop the networks of reciprocity and mutual aid

that help us respond to the many crises we face. At a deeper level, when informed by non-dual traditions, relational training seeps down and transforms the mindsets that facilitate systems of domination and oppression which ultimately created the conditions for ecological collapse.⁸

Humans are social beings. Ample evidence suggests that humans evolved to thrive when rooted in community and in healthy relationships defined by mutuality.⁹ Moreover, it is clear that humans experience varying degrees of harm inside transaction-based interactions.¹⁰ For example, just as attachment theory demonstrated the vital importance of consistent and responsive caregivers in early development to overall mortality and morbidity,¹¹ Social Baseline Theory suggests that brains encode the presence of companions as bioenergetic resources, like oxygen or glucose, when anticipating the metabolic costs of any situation.¹² For example, when asked to estimate the degree of incline of a hill in controlled experiments, the presence (or absence) of others actually influences how steep people assess the hill ahead of them. Participants who felt more networked than others rated visual inclines as less high than peers who felt less networked; and they also rated weighted backpacks on their backs as less heavy than those who felt more isolated. This data suggests that quite literally, the road in front of us and the burdens we have to carry are lessened when we feel connected. Applied to the work of changemaking, the implications are that the more connected we feel, the more resourced we feel for the work ahead. This is in part what we mean when we say softening our sense of separation and cultivating relationality is the goal and the path.

Yet, there are many times in which we find ourselves physically alone, or in conditions absent of mutuality. In order to access the resources necessary for sustaining long-term activism, we need to be able to call upon that unbreakable sense of connection at all times. This is why we draw on a relational contemplative frame primarily from non-dual Tibetan Buddhist traditions that help us learn ways of sensing ourselves as fundamentally in relationship with others and our world regardless of the physical presence—or absence—of others.¹³

Love and compassion are fundamentally relational capacities that are nurtured and strengthened in and through relationship and community. While we can of course learn tools and practices to strengthen our love and compassion, we learn to love the way that we have been loved in and through relationships. In our relational approach to fostering care and connection, informed by Sustainable Compassion Training¹⁴, we explore practices for receiving and extending care, and resting in deep self-care. The beauty of this approach is that it allows the opportunity to learn new ways of loving and showing up even if they were not modeled for us by our family or community.

Contemplative and somatic practices of receiving care help us learn to experience ourselves as held within a web or field of care. This web of interconnection encompasses the experience of being held in and by nature, community, family, lineage, ancestors, and all who have come before us. In this practice, participants are guided to sense this field in many ways, via memories of responsive and consistent caretakers both human and nonhuman. For example, in our trainings, participants are invited to sense the experience of being held by the earth cradling their body, by the warmth of the sun, by the vastness of the sky, or by the care put into the building of our homes. Participants are also invited to sense into this field of care in the minutia of kindness expressed by a passerby or by figures that have instilled a sense of joy, welcome or warmth. For some, this brings to mind the comforting memories of parents or other caregivers, for others, it evokes nonhuman companions or celestial beings. What results is an opportunity to shift felt awareness from the ego striving in this world to an awareness of the presence of the million acts of love and care and sheer luck that have come together to make life—including our own lives—possible. There are so many simple everyday moments of unconditional support that go unnoticed; moments in which someone or some being was present to us, rooting for us, wishing us well, taking joy in us, or witnessing our deepest potential. Whether the moments of care were intentional or not, we are all being held up in care throughout our days and throughout our lives. We literally wouldn't be alive if this weren't the case.

Nurtured by this memory of support—by this field of care in which all beings are embedded—one can more easily access the resources required to extend that same quality of care to others. With this practice, we guide participants toward connecting with the ongoing energy and activity of the lineages of care and compassion that precede, support, and enable their spiritual activism. By returning repeatedly to the field of care, to this secure base in which one is held and deeply seen, we experience workshop participants as more empowered to encounter others relationally—not as objects but also as subjects, as part of the “we-verse”.¹⁵

Shifting to a relational frame calls us to move beyond solely cultivating strong interpersonal relationships. It is about learning to soften the boundaries between self, others, and the world. On an even more profound level, nourishing the self with an awareness of the field of care is to engage in deep self-care, to rest beyond the dualities of me versus it; us versus them; and ultimately, subject and object. It involves truly letting-be in non-dual awareness. Learning to abide in this non-dual awareness helps one to sense life beyond the limited and distinct sense of self to access the spaciousness, wisdom, warmth, and creative capacities that support the shift to a relational paradigm.

Contemporary contemplative movements have been rightfully criticized for hiding behind the language of nondual oneness to avoid some deep anti-oppression work. For example, many have criticized modern mindfulness-based interventions for their focus on providing tools for individual health and well-being rather than tools for assessing and challenging systemic oppression.¹⁶ While we believe that non-dual practices can support addressing the fundamental dualism at the root of many of our contemporary crises, we also know that without investigating the ways in which we are deeply conditioned by systems of oppression, we may bypass such liberatory work in service of a false sense of relationality through these very practices. As others have paraphrased the seminal work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his treatise on the trouble of power without love, “Love that does not ‘descend’ into the struggle for justice is incomplete, if not irrelevant. Engaged spirituality, therefore, explicitly confronts social, political, and economic structures that are deemed unjust and contributory to the suffering of some needful group.”¹⁷ Our CourageRISE model, therefore, is designed not only to help participants sense themselves as more connected, but also to help them act from that awareness.

(R)eveal Truths

“There’s a way out of this mess, and it requires each of us to begin with our own body. You and your body are important parts of the solution... Your body—all of our bodies—are where changing the status quo must begin.”¹⁸

Resmaa Menakem

Truth is broadly recognized as essential to reconciliation and thus transformation. Revealing truth includes advancing a shared understanding of the various manifestations of domination and oppression, the ways in which it sustains and persists, and how it is reproduced through our bodies. This focus on embodiment and the social reproduction of oppression is crucial, although it can be experienced as threatening in a world that so rarely invites concurrent awareness of the needs of the body when engaging with a community—professional or otherwise. However, we find in the workshops that we lead that grounding in a sense of interconnection reduces the fragility associated with facing unseen stressors such as the truth of hidden injustices and profound suffering. And facing the truth with the softness of compassion and the ferocity of resolve is a nuanced experience that in and of itself brings insight into how to embody new liberatory cultures.

What needs to be revealed is the reality that there is no existence outside of the system. Systems of oppression live in and through everything we do:

our beliefs, our interactions, our institutional policies, our cultural myths and practices.¹⁹ Features of white supremacy culture²⁰—like urgency, individualism, fear of open conflict, and quantity over quality—live in the body, unknowingly shaping how individuals move in the world, do business, and make plans. These features are presented as normative responses via various mediums in western culture including film, print, unspoken family rules, professional norms, and aspects of “polite” culture as defined by those in power. Given the innate desire for belonging as a feature of safety, we consciously or unconsciously shape ourselves to fit in, to find connection, or to survive. We call such habitual tendencies that we use to protect ourselves “stress shapes.”²¹

These stress shapes are safety seeking mechanisms at heart. Revealing the existence of these shapes and honoring their innate wisdom is an important step for loosening their unconscious control over our reactions. Without an awareness and ownership of one’s role in reifying systems of oppression, individuals inadvertently replicate them in periods of stress. For example, coalitions of people committed to social change notoriously crumble under the weight of interpersonal deception and distrust as members rely upon all-too familiar power tactics internally.²² Similarly, responding to any suggestion in a work setting with immediate defensiveness or appeasement is a common and natural response from the over-burdened and underappreciated worker. Although there is a natural wisdom to these shapes, relying upon them as a habitual default results in compromised access to agency thereby limiting our potential growth and healing.

Intersecting systems of oppression such as racism, (cis)sexism, capitalism, and others create axes of privilege and disadvantage for all. To live in a dominance-based hierarchy is to live in a culture predicated upon the conditionality of belonging invariably resulting in considerable stress.²³ Although that stress is distributed inequitably, favoring those closest to conforming to the mythical norm—white, masculine of center, cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied adults assigned male at birth—it is clear that it is at great cost to everyone, even those most privileged by the system. In concrete terms, experimental studies demonstrate that the existence of policies and laws that limit freedoms for one group have negative impacts on all groups²⁴ such that areas with high rates of bias toward white supremacy produce higher rates of health impacts upon white people in the area as well.²⁵

Reshaping, or developing a flexibility in our shapes, entails first a reckoning of the ways in which the system(s) privilege certain “shapes” over others, decentering the mythical norm as the ideal, taking ownership for fostering new habits in oneself and others, and then accessing the resources needed for healing that harm. Given that these shapes have solidified through years of practice,

revealing their roots and functions while investing in fostering new responses takes time. With time, intention, and effort expended learning to soften ones' armoring, individuals can re-wire their own nervous systems for lessened vigilance, increased trust and an increased capacity for earning the trust of others. This process requires a delicate interplay of the willingness to co-hold each other's vulnerability and the willingness to be held in one's truth.

Insight comes from understanding how oppression is internalized and re-expressed through the co-construction of norms, preferences and privileges. The willingness to confront the truth of the self as an unwitting agent of a system and the stamina to interrupt and reshape patterns in the presence of community are essential ingredients of change. In their absence, the fragile ego remains defensive of the status quo and the likelihood of baking the same old dysfunctional relational patterns into new systems is high. Uprooting or transforming these cultural practices requires new practices cultivated within and by community. And the truth is it takes a collective to shift a society.

(I)nvest in Healing

*i've been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;
dear god
i come from two countries
one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.*

*later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?
it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.²⁶*

Warsan Shire

With truth comes the possibility of reconciliation, but not without repair. In addition to physical and economic reparations, repairing the damage incurred from systems of oppression requires healing the wounding those systems have

inflicted. However, healing is a political concept in a culture that commodifies health and relies upon a widely held conviction that the only commonality among humanity is the state of being flawed or incomplete. Yet, an actual, undeniable commonality among humanity is the inclination toward integration.²⁷

As organisms, our bodies are relentless in their efforts to integrate, adapt and move forward. Inevitably, the process of integration entails bringing life force to the wound with its accompanying resources for repair. In the physical body, this looks like stimulating blood flow to the damaged tissue; in the brain this looks like the initiation of new neural connections. In the spiritual body, this is characterized by the application of awareness to the site of wounding, and in community, this looks like holding space. In this way, one can see how the process of bringing attention to an issue is a component of healing the harm. However, this is not a purely intellectual—or individual—endeavor. As so many have noted, trauma lives in the DNA and the soft tissues of the body;²⁸ however, it also lives in the structures that societies build to support a social arrangement. To invest in healing requires an investment that is on the scale of the wounding. It involves intra-personal, inter-personal and systemic repair, as well as tools for resting, releasing, rejoicing, and centering what is good.

With a relational frame, at all levels of social ecology, healing entails tending to and repairing relationships. At the intrapersonal level, it involves shifting self-appraisals of mistakes from failure to growth, from being one's harshest critic to becoming one's dearest confidant. This intrapersonal repair work is political with a focus on releasing many of the tools of systems of oppression like shame, secrecy, and self-criticism. The work of surfacing intergenerational wounds and disrupting the internalization of oppression varies in accordance with one's positionality at the intersection of oppressive forces.²⁹ For those that are just comprehending the depth of harm, the work is often focused on building the stamina to stay with the pain and the fortitude to remain present, nonjudgmental, and accessible to community. For those of whom awareness of injustice is ingrained in their DNA, healing practices are more focused on metabolizing the pain, rage, and frustration, as well as resting and restoring the capacity to access hope and trust more readily.

At an interpersonal level, healing-centered practice includes increasing our capacity to show up in relationships without pretense and to tend to the small ruptures in trust that occur as we navigate competing needs. If we are to shift successfully to a relational paradigm, we must center relationships and the art of practicing love, mutuality, and accountability. The work includes adopting an abolitionist mindset in all relationships. Rather than jumping to punishment, what would happen if one's response was to expand one's receptivity to

the unmet need at the root of the conflict while remaining firm about boundaries? Investing in healing toward this possible alternative entails engaging in practices that improve a sense of grounded awareness of each person's needs and practicing the art of compassionate communication that extends tenderness to all others—our colleagues, our friends, our families, other workers. To do this work, we find it is necessary to cultivate a practice of somatic awareness, consent, and apology. Healing woundedness of the self and others is by no means a passive or submissive process. Tending to what has been harmed takes a ferocity of courage and resolve.³⁰ Repair as a stance allows for growth, change, learning and healing. Rather than a focus on disposing of those that make mistakes, the focus is on becoming freer together.

And at a systems level, healing involves repairing the violent harms and legacies of colonialism and slavery. This call for repair is more than a shift in mindset. As Eve Tucker and K. Wayne Yang remind us, “decolonization is not a metaphor”³¹—it is not a call to simply “decolonize our minds,” but rather to, quite literally, repatriate land to Indigenous peoples. The call, too, for reparations, is about systemically addressing the wealth gap in the US and reckoning with the generations of harm and legacies of colonialism and slavery.

Equally as important as the investment in healing is the framework for healing. In the dominant frame, there is a normative understanding of health and physical ability that obscures the possibility of delight, pleasure, and meaning as existing or accessible in differently abled or functioning bodies. In his book, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure*, Eli Clare, a white, disabled, genderqueer justice advocate, explores the social and historical roots of the idea of cure—the belief that minds and bodies considered “broken” need to be fixed.³² Eli brings attention to the paradox of the concept of being cured as it presupposes a state of “normal” to which one can or should return. Rather than embrace the multiplicity of ways to be healthy and worthy of belonging despite the fluctuation in functioning to which all bodies are subject if uninterrogated, the concept of healing can be weaponized to reify the status quo.

Too often, notions of “normal” perpetuate legitimizing white supremacist myths which center and reify white, male, and able-bodied norms, thereby rendering all others as abnormal. Consequently, the rhetoric of cure suggests that those who do not conform to this norm need to become more like this norm, or risk being further marginalized, which is one of the ways systems of oppression insidiously structure our world. The degree to which we conform to this norm often correlates to the likelihood of struggling with anxiety, depression, or any other seemingly “negative” psychological states. Although such experiences are natural responses to finding yourself at the margins and potentially

internalizing those harmful norms, the system perpetuates itself by labeling this logical response as “sick” and unwell.

How do we avoid endorsing normative notions of good that invariably cause harm, while also acknowledging the pain and suffering that can and should be addressed? The question therefore becomes something like the serenity prayer: how do we develop the wisdom to discern when to be with what is, and when do we work to change it? This inquiry grounds our understanding of healing as a stance, which is the capacity to hold both the beauty and deep “okayness” of all that is, while also acknowledging the pain, harm, and injustice that needs to be repaired.

Across healing lineages, there are obvious patterns. Wounds require loving attention and regular clearing. Broken bones benefit from gentle but firm holding. Diseases are exacerbated by stress and eased by slowing down and finding the breath. The earth provides comfort and plant medicines that can aid recovery. Those who have known and metabolized this pain can serve as great healers of the pain. The path to recovery entails reconnecting with your center and finding a balance with the world around you. It is within and through the support of community that one finds the resources to survive and heal just about anything. For these reasons, while we stand firm that there are wounds that require tending, much of our own healing trajectory is grounded in the theory of non-fixing, non-doing, and even rest. By “not-doing,” we learn to do something incredibly profound—to connect with our basic nature and our basic capacity for healing or resilience.

We also bow to the wisdom of the Nap Ministry,³³ a rest movement founded by Nap Bishop Tricia Hersey. Hersey is a Black scholar, activist, theologian, and performing artist who teaches a radical form of resistance that highlights the liberating power of naps. The movement itself is a challenge to white supremacist and capitalist culture and its norms of urgency, production, busyness and workaholism. Through rest, we not only resist and decondition ourselves from exploitative systems, but we also provide space to feel effects of these violent, oppressive systems, and to grieve the loss of land, connection to lineage, loss of relationships, loss of people to violence, loss of our own dignity and humanity. Such rest is particularly powerful for BIPOC bodies who have been the target of direct extraction and exploitation around the globe.

Embodying a culture of healing is a call to live in ways that are antithetical to aspects of the dominant culture by which many of us have been shaped. We are being called to nurture community and collective leadership rather than individualism, to collaborate rather than to compete, to reconnect with each other and to the land in non-exploitive or extractive ways, to slow down enough to feel and to heal, and to learn to dream outside of the box.

As we begin to feel more, we may become aware that there is more than suffering here—that there is some basic okayness, or even ease, present in the midst of our despair. Or, perhaps, we may notice that the work of building a more beautiful world can be joyful. We might experience it as the joy of getting more real, or the joy of deepening connection, or the joy of becoming freer. Surely, some of us may resist this joy—how dare we experience joy while others are suffering?!—but the joy we are referring to is not escapist; it is, as Audre Lorde reminds us, a kind of power. As we “begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives,” she writes, “we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that we feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.” Joy and pleasure, or the erotic, call us to refuse to settle for “the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.”³⁴ In this way, centering joy is not an antidote, but rather an affirmation of our fullest being.

We also know that emotions like joy, contentment, and deep belonging to ourselves and each other can help us tap into our inherent capacities for creativity and innovation. As researcher Barbara Fredrickson’s work on the Broaden and Build theory suggests, when we feel isolated, threatened, or sad, we literally cannot generate the same diversity or creativity of solutions as we are able to when we are experiencing positive emotions.³⁵ And our ability to imagine a different way of being, to soften, and sense the alternatives that already abound around us is the precise capacity that is so often unleashed through the process of healing to our wholeness.

(S)ense Alternatives

*who imagined this world?
 this absence of right relationship to earth?
 this violent addiction to dominating each other?
 these myths of superiority of those with pale skin or external sex organs or
 bodies without kinks in the bones, or born on this side of manmade, and
 cruelly held, borders?
 who imagined that these prison bars or jails and schools would generate
 safety?
 who imagined a generation or more would tolerate this black and brown
 hunger? and this allowance that some will hunger while others feast, not
 oblivious, but willfully, and structurally, ignorant?³⁶*

adrienne maree brown

We are living in what adrienne maree brown calls an “imagination battle.” Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are working in service of someone’s vision—through our actions, our work, and how and where we spend our money and our time. We need tools to help us (re)claim our own future visions and the courage to live into them.

Envisioning liberated futures requires a capacity to see beyond or outside of the current oppressive systems’ frame. This is a skill that is not widely taught in mainstream education for perhaps the obvious fact that it does not serve the current systems. However, folks from the margins have long held the capacity to see multiple worlds, because as Gloria Anzaldúa explains, they have been forced by the structure of society to negotiate living in multiple worlds.³⁷ Whereas some might be tempted to view the margins as a site of deprivation and despair, bell hooks instead implores us to see the margins as “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.” It is the margins, in her view, that are the central location for resistance and creativity.³⁸

Centering the margins is an important practice for all of us: when we start from an anti-relational, capitalist, and white supremacist frame, we inadvertently center whiteness. Yet, by centering Blackness and black people in the creation of new policies, we shift not only the frame but also the balance of power.³⁹ Furthermore, by centering both Black and Indigenous⁴⁰ voices in our work, we center the incredible wisdom for nurturing the capacity for resilience that these lineages have faced in response to centuries of extreme oppression and violence.

All truly transformative justice work has begun at the margins. Traditions of science fiction that re-imagine our world but with less suffering are a powerful exercise of world building rooted in our current reality. As Walidah Imanisha, co-editor of *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories for Social Justice Movements*,⁴¹ reminds us, “anytime we try to envision a world without poverty, prisons, or capitalism, we are engaging in a practice of science fiction.”⁴²

Still, some people are critical of envisioning alternative futures, often because they are overly idealistic, abstract utopias, or because the activity of envisioning itself becomes a way to bypass coming to grips with reality, as hard as that may be. Groups focused on adapting to life in an unstable world beset by climate change and social collapse often reject the call to envision positive futures given their conviction that things will get much worse in the foreseeable future. They are already embracing and preparing for this grim reality and sense that visionary ideations are distractions from the hard data in front of us. It is better to grieve the loss of a positive future, they contend, so we focus on the hard work of adapting to and caring for one another amidst societal collapse.⁴³

We, too, embrace the need to prepare for this future. Denying its possibility creates the potential for more harm and less preparedness. Many communities—especially those at the so-called margins—are already feeling the impact of climate change far more than well-resourced folks. Many more of us will die if climate change continues unabated and those of us remaining will be pushed to fight for scarce resources.

At the same time, the future is not written. We believe it is important to hold this truth as well and to embrace the possibility of what some, like Joanna Macy and others, call the Great Transition.⁴⁴ We may organize and mobilize to not only avoid collapse, but to reorganize society to sustain itself in dynamic equilibrium with the Earth's systems. The vision of a way of life in harmony with each other and nature—what some have called Ecological Civilization—is still a viable possibility.⁴⁵ We therefore believe we need to move beyond binary thinking and prepare for the possibilities of both/and. In other words, we need to urgently resist climate change, demand aggressive climate policies, and work to support those most vulnerable to the climate crisis, while also working to build regenerative and life-affirming social systems. Even if we fail in some measure, our efforts could still serve us amidst the chaos.

Developing the capacity to hold complexity is an embodied skill. The practice of staying present to the reality of multiple futures calls one to develop a radical responsiveness and relatedness to the world. Following Rebecca Solnit, we understand hope as a spiritual practice of embracing uncertainty and our capacity to affect future outcomes through our actions.⁴⁶

We draw on various traditions to support this practice. Developing the capacity to question or to critically understand the agenda constraining the variety of stories portrayed in movies, tv shows, and print media takes practice. So much time is spent trying to discern what is “true” that entertaining the possibility that there are many truths can feel strange. This is precisely the point.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote about the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”⁴⁷—the idea that humans often take abstract concepts and impose them upon a reality that is always more complex than our ideas can capture. And in so doing, humans concretize and reify that reality. Problems arise when we mistake the concept for reality itself, or assume things are fixed or as they appear.

This tendency toward concretization is why traditions that help one learn to refrain from reifying one's experience are so important, and why the apophatic and mystical dimensions found in so many religious and spiritual traditions are so critical to transformative processes. These traditions help one to unlearn habituated patterns of reification and illuminate the nature of reality which some describe as empty, co-emergent, interdependent, and responsive. Practic-

es within these traditions also help one get in touch with the field of potential so that we may sense not only that things are not always as they appear, but that the possibilities for what is here and what could be are innumerable. Learning to tap into this field is critical to the project of building a more caring and just world.

(E)nact Beloved Community

“You seek allies and, together, begin building spiritual/political communities that struggle for personal growth and social justice. By compartiendo historias, ideas, las nepantleras forge bonds across race, gender, and other lines, thus creating a new tribalism. Éste quehacer—internal work coupled with commitment to struggle for social transformation—changes your relationship to your body, and, in turn, to other bodies and to the world. And when that happens, you change the world.”⁴⁸

Gloria E. Anzaldúa

The ideal of beloved community popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was by no means conceptualized as a work of fiction, but a reality achievable in our lifetime. The beloved community he worked for was one of genuine inter-group mutuality, achievable through the practice of non-violence and the cultivation of unconditional love for other beings. Dr King’s beloved community was characterized by a quality of “understanding, redeeming goodwill for all,” an “overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative... the love of God operating in the human heart.” This quality of love, or “Agape, is love seeking to preserve and create community.” In his sermons on beloved community, the reverend noted that while economic and political power are essential for achieving a state of beloved community, their purpose is for the creation of the conditions that affirm the inherent worthiness and dignity of all life. It is this understanding of beloved community that we uplift.

However, the movement from sensing alternatives to manifesting them is risky. Not only is birthing alternatives arduous and messy, people are reasonably reticent to try something unfamiliar when the chance of failure is high in a culture of competition and disposability. It explains why, for example, someone might line up someone new before leaving a committed relationship. People have been conditioned to want an insurance plan, and in the U.S., people live in a society structured without a social safety net. Yet, paradigms have repeatedly shifted throughout human history precisely because a small group of people had the courage to live differently.

Sustaining efforts to actualize the soul's yearning for beloved community therefore entails adopting an ethic of risk. In her book, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, feminist scholar Sharon Welch describes an action-oriented stance that involves repeatedly showing up for justice in the face of struggle and defeat.⁴⁹ This courageous, compassion-oriented ethic of risk, captured by Welch's inquiry—"What improbable task, with which unpredictable results, shall we undertake today?"—is the heart of spiritual activism. An ethic of risk has long been heralded by those at the margins with very little to lose. Influenced by the work of Alice Walker and other womanist thinkers, an "ethic of risk" relies on one's ability to ground in community, respond to emergent tensions, honor one's commitments, be accountable for one's actions, and take risks. It is the courage of showing up, without any guarantee or even expectation of reward or recognition for one's efforts. An ethic of risk calls us to show up for not just ourselves or our families, but for the many generations to come. It is deeply relational in its vision and its practice.

Embodying beloved community entails sustaining all the skills and habits practiced in the previous parts of the CourageRISE model over time and despite repeated mistakes. This includes acting with full awareness of humanity's intrinsic interdependence with each other and all other aspects of life. It entails undertaking healing practices and learning what it means to sustain them over time; taking a stand and being accountable to one's values and priorities and making amends when one falters. It means practicing consent in all interactions, treating all other beings as sacred, prioritizing the well-being of all over the acquisition of wealth and prestige, and committing to repair harm. It means embodying the courage to live our wildest dreams of unconditional belonging. It requires daring to trust a community with your precious, naked heart and having the courage to hold each other accountable with ferocity and with an unrelenting commitment to redemption when that trust has been betrayed. In short, it entails coming to terms with the fact that each person's life is tied to the fate of all beings—the honeybee, the cockroach, the neighbor next door, and the refugee at the border—because there is no planet B.

Conclusion

While there is no blueprint for the future, there is a collective yearning for (re) connection to the earth, the ancestors, the nonhuman world, and the divine evident across wisdom lineages and social justice efforts around the world. We offer the courageRISE model as a means of connecting diverse lineages of theory and praxis in service of mutual learning and collaboration.

Just as there is no singular path to awakening, there is no singular role that is needed to actualize beloved community. What is needed is every flawed and fabulous person living into their full selves with humility, deep appreciation, a commitment to growth, and the willingness to take a chance. We all have our roles: Some of us are healers, some researchers, some activists, some organizers, some advocates, some builders, some weavers, some defenders, some tenders, etc. Regardless of one's role, embodying a more relational frame means continuing to ask what else is here with a quality of curiosity, tenderness, and the ferocity of a devoted caregiver equally devoted to all beings under their care. Unlike the divisive, incendiary and restrictive status quo, this line of inquiry is expansive, generative, and receptive to the redemptive potential of each moment.

In this essay we have explored one such path to collective liberation: the CourageRISE model. Grounded in connection and hope, the practices detailed in this essay represent a weaving of many lineages of care, wisdom, and freedom. Although we have continuously acknowledged the deep wounding and injustices that abound, we have also outlined a transformative, relational framework that draws on the deep resiliencies and acts of care that abound in equal measure. We hope it reminds each reader that while the world may literally be on fire, our story is not yet over. Each moment presents a new beginning; each breath a new future being born; take courage and rise to meet the moment.

We invite you to join us as we work to strengthen the relational tissue within and between our movements for justice and liberation. To learn more, please visit us at www.courageofcare.org.

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