

NO ONE IS FREE UNTIL WE ARE ALL FREE



REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTIVE LIBERATION

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Let us Propagate an Ethic of Love for Only that Can Save Us

By Moise St Louis, PhD. Associate Dean of Students, Dir. Center for Multicultural Affairs and Services

I have often wondered what enables someone to watch another human being suffer and do nothing or intentionally be the cause of that suffering. What makes it possible for someone to quiet their conscience and turn toward inaction when faced with others in physical and emotional pain? What kind of transformation does a human being have to undergo to be able to actively cause pain, actively disregard the pain of other human beings, or not recognize the pain when they see it? Or worse, what kind of socialization can lead one to consider another human being as less than oneself? What kind of conditioning, what kind of lessons, enforcements, institutions, and norms would reduce the capacity of a human being to show care or compassion to another?

When these questions are contemplated, we often refer to Martin Neimoller's sorrowful remembrance of the cost to himself because of those whom he failed to protect. We often recite his poem as an indication that we understand:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

What Neimoller lamented was his plight, but what he implied was an inability to recognize the humanity of those he let perish, to recognize their worth as human beings, and more importantly, his failure to be moved by their suffering. This failure continues to exert a price both on our body and on our soul. bell hooks suggests that

Many of us are motivated to move against domination solely when we feel our self-interest directly threatened. Often, then, the longing is not for a collective transformation of society, an end to politics of dominations, but rather simply for an end to what we feel is hurting us. Fundamentally, if we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination ¹.

¹“Love as the Practice of Freedom” bell hooks

In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (1994), hooks advocates for a “holistic” repudiation of all forms of domination, which she coined as a “progressive cultural revolution”. Like Frantz Fanon and other anti-colonial theorists, she suggests that decolonizing our minds requires “surrender(ing) participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination we enjoy individual and group privilege.” hooks sees colonization and oppression as conditioning both the colonizer and colonized / the oppressed and the oppressor.

This focus on the self and failure to be moved by human suffering, for me, is the consequence of the process of dehumanization embedded in systems of domination. It is this necessary process of dehumanization of the marginalized that prevents those of us in positions of power and privilege from recognizing them as fully human and fully meriting our consideration and compassion.

To quiet our conscience, we must make of them caricatures, stereotypes, and build imageries and false narratives to justify their oppression and our inaction. Otherwise, it is our humanity and decency we would feel compelled to scrutinize. This dehumanization is what allowed men and women to come with their Sunday best, picnic baskets in hand, to watch and participate in lynchings and horrid mutilations; it is what allowed them to defile and leave hanging a body for days to terrorize communities and family members. It is also, what allowed for uprooting of the Japanese, fellow Americans, into internment Camps, and permitted too many to live in and support segregation by their inaction even when it gnawed at their conscience. This dehumanization, this failure to recognize others as fully human, is what allows some to respond “all Lives matter” or “Blue Lives matter” to those decrying the death of the unarmed and innocents when a show of compassion and understanding would have soothed the aggrieved. It is what allows now for the demonization of immigrants and imprisonment and caging of children without broad sustained national outrage and revulsion.

But what kind of education, what kind of religious or ethical teachings, what kind of socialization does one undergo to arrive at this failure of recognition and inaction in the face of human suffering and oppression? Perhaps if we ask the right questions, if we can understand its source and fully grasp its impact, we can find ways to unlearn it and regain our humanity and our ability to see and recognize each other fully. The centering of the self and failure to recognize others as full human beings with equal worth as ourselves bar us from considering them, or prioritizing their needs as reflective of our own. This is what led King to exclaim in his final speech (referring to the sanitation workers he came to help) in the church in Memphis Tennessee before he was killed, **“The Question is not what will happen to me if I help but what will happen to them if I don’t”**.

While Neimoller, centers his own well-being and safety as the primary motivation to act when others are targeted, King points in a different direction. While the former lamented the costs he incurred for his inaction, the latter commanded us to act purposefully and decisively without concern for ourselves but to safeguard the other. The consideration, King tells us, should not be for us but for the targeted, the bullied, the dominated, and the oppressed. But how does one change one’s socialization into systems of domination that condition us to disregard others? How does one overcome the process of dehumanization of others? King, much like Gandhi, felt that suffering without resorting to violence would compel a recognition of the humanity of the targeted. They hoped to trigger the conscience by making it impossible to deny the suffering of the other. They sought to make that suffering of the targeted and marginalized so visible, so ubiquitous, that the privileged would have to acknowledge it and through that acknowledgment, the humanity of both the privileged and the marginalized would be revealed and re-gained. Both hoped that the inability to be shielded from that suffering would reveal the lack of humanity of the privileged and such discovery would be so unbearable, it would trigger a re-evaluation. What a continued cost to pay for the marginalized! What an additional burden to carry from an already

brutalizing reality! Why should further suffering be the source of collective salvation? Does it need to be?

One could argue that either King's individualism betrays him or that he understood all too well the conditioning and process of dehumanization systems of domination embody, and the transformation and rehumanization necessary to overcome it. Because the question should have been not just what would happen to those who are targeted, but what would happen to me, to my soul, my humanity, my ability to look at myself in the mirror without shame if I don't act in the face of suffering? However, for that to be the question - for the welfare of others (of the targeted and marginalized) to become bound with that of the privileged and beneficiaries of systems of domination - a transformation must take place. A transformation that enables us "to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained," hooks tells us. Until we do that, "we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle²." This transformation, she suggests, is only possible if we develop "an ethics of love".

How then do we develop that ethic of love when we are conditioned by systems of domination when political institutions, parents, media, churches, and educational institutions reinforce effortlessly that conditioning? This, I think, is where the conversation begins. How do we move our institutions toward propagating an ethic of love? How do we take care to divest from systems of domination and marginalization and invest in this ethic of love that can help us clear the blinders that prevents all of us from identifying with or recognizing the suffering of others?

bell hooks tells us, "A culture of domination is anti-love. It requires violence to sustain itself. To choose love is to go against the prevailing values of the culture." The project of rehumanization necessary for the "enhancement of the human person" so that "the dignity of each person can be acknowledged" and protected therefore requires us to develop and adopt an ethic of love - One that challenges the prevailing values of our culture, and moves us away from the violence of the body and soul.

How could we prioritize this ethic of love in our curricular and co-curricular engagements, in the way we frame the educational project, the student experience, and the institution itself? Is it possible to adopt an ethic of love centered on collective liberation and the common good that can/will move us away from the violence of domination and allow us to regain our humanity and see in each other the source of our liberation?

Answering this question is more important now than ever. In an environment where even a modicum of human progress is at risk, where goodness and decency are in question, we hope you will engage with us in an exploration of collective liberation and a conversation on regaining a hold of our common humanity. Perhaps, our conversations may help us answer our own questions about the value of others, not rhetorically but fundamentally centered in deeds - our own actions and voices. I believe if we can reject the dehumanization necessary for systems

² Love as the Practice of Freedom" bell hooks

of domination to sustain itself, **undermine its** propagation in the way we engage with each other, we can be a community in which people say to each other as Theodore Roszak once wrote,

“You and I... we meet as strangers, each carrying a mystery within us. I cannot say who you are; I may never know you completely. But I trust that you are a person in your own right, possessed of a beauty and value that are the Earth’s richest treasures. So I make this promise to you: I will impose no identities upon you, but will invite you to become yourself without shame or fear. I will hold open a space for you in the world and defend your right to fill it with an authentic vocation. For as long as your search takes, you have my loyalty³.”

Only an ethic of love will move us to make this promise to each other and to sustain it. As you read these essays, I invite you to imagine a campus, a community, and a society guided by such an ethic and ask you to not just imagine it but to actualize it.

³Theodore Roszak (1979) *A Person Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society*.

Normalizing a Discourse of Disobedience and Collective Liberation By Professor Patrick Standen, PhD., Philosophy

“Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves”
H.D. Thoreau

Growing up in Vermont I was never taught MLK in any educational setting. Indeed, I would need to find and read his works on my own as I would Plato, Thoreau and Gandhi’s, too. I was not alone. Growing up in Georgia, U.S. Congressperson and civil right activist, John Lewis offers this remembrance of learning about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“I remember back in the 1960s - late '50s, really - reading a comic book called 'Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Story.' Fourteen pages. It sold for 10 cents. And this little book inspired me to attend non-violence workshops, to study about Gandhi, about Thoreau, to study Martin Luther King, Jr., to study civil disobedience.”

Lewis mentions Gandhi, Thoreau and King and comic books all in a single sentence. Let us investigate further the reason for Lewis’ mash-up. I think it allows us a glimpse into the obstacles for collective liberation in contemporary political discourse. I will also argue that despite the historical omissions, these thinkers and their ideas are not radical at all. In fact, they speak to the central question of philosophy that is the seeming contradiction between the individual and the collective. I will begin with re-centring King’s discourse.

In his celebrated *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr King situates himself at the very centre of the Western philosophical project. This positioning is, I believe, both deliberately political and essential. It is political because it addresses the individual within the ambit of political power. It is essential because we need to grasp the fundamental relationship between the individual and the collective. Referencing the founder of Western philosophy, Plato, and the archetypal philosopher cum activist, Socrates, King places civil disobedience and the struggle for equality at the mainstream of politics and ethics. For doing this, King becomes the true heir to Socrates in the 20th century. It is my claim in this short essay to point the oft-overlooked truth to this claim. King’s movement for civil disobedience is often taught—when it is taught—as a radical departure or exception to the mainstream discourse of the Western project. I take it that such deflection is politically motivated. To marginalize King’s discourse and the centrality of civil disobedience is an attempt to make a potentially revolutionary populace obedient. I think a reconsideration is in order here because by aligning his discourse in this manner he grounds the individual within the collective, the inexorability of the personal and the political. King echoes William James’ quote “The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual; the impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.”

King begins with Plato a figure who many hold is the very beginning of the Western political and legal tradition that concerns itself with this approach. In Plato’s dialogue, “*Crito*,” we visit Socrates in the Athenian jail as he awaits his execution. The dialogue is one of the “jailhouse” dialogues* written by Plato about the last days of Socrates’ life. In both dialogues, we encounter a man facing death with an aspirational calm and courage. Instead of trying to escape—which he could have easily done—or pining about the miscarriage of justice, Socrates

was reputed to engage in philosophic debate and inquiry about the nature of the soul, its immortality; and, in “Crito” the very nature of a civilized society. In “Crito,” Socrates engages his long-time friend, Crito, in a debate about the nature of law and presents the first argument for civil disobedience. It is precisely this discussion King is referring to in his celebrated letter from the Birmingham jail and upon which he will erect his scaffolding of political engagement and collective liberation. I read this as both an endorsement of the autonomy of the individual to resist and the importance of the collective to be responsive to the individual’s resistance.

Long and largely ignored by proponents of the Western philosophical tradition, King centres the question of political change at the heart of the philosophic project. By both affirming the autonomy of resistance of the individual and the all-important role of the community, King essentially rephrases Plato’s question from the *Crito*, by asking how we ground our nations in either myth or law. Dispensing with myth, law becomes the chosen path for Plato in the *Crito*. King will follow Plato here. King further grounds his movement of civil disobedience—the conscience of the individual⁴—deeper within the Western philosophical and jurisprudential traditions by turning to St. Augustine. Reading Plato and Augustine we learn that law is an expression of justice and as King rightly notes regarding Augustine, Augustine once claimed an unjust law is simply not a law. This is the central argument to King’s project. Any law that is unjust or prejudicial violates the very nature of law itself and as a consequence must be re-legislated or transgressed. It is likely that the law in questions is based on an irrational basis rather than rational consideration. In short, if the law unjustly treats an individual, the law must be invalidated. Let us look at King’s own words,

“YOU express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that, “An unjust law is no law at all.”

In this paragraph, King raises the objections of his fellow clergy and answers the more timid members by correctly re-centring the debate about the nature of law as understood within the Western legal and philosophical tradition. This tradition grounded law on an objective rational basis to protect the individual. This approach began with Socrates in Plato’s “Crito” and is later defended by Augustine who grounded it within the Stoic’s notion of a natural law. Once wedded with Christianity, the natural law tradition as it will be known views a just law as one cohering with a divine law. Any law that does not square with the universalist conception is invalid. In short, if law is not fair, it is not a law. To whom is it fair toward? The individual. Again, in King’s words:

“How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the

⁴ I take it this is at the heart of Socrates’ *daimonion* or his voice. As a Spiritual fact –checking (vide Shorey)

terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.”

I want to repeat and emphasize that last sentence: *Any Law that degrades human personality is unjust*. Why? This is the central dialectical shift to King’s argument. A law is just when it creates the conditions for human flourishing. A law that fails to provide for those conditions is no law at all. It follows that an individual has a moral obligation to resist or re-legislate that law until just laws are restored.

King was well aware that the tradition within which he was acting and arguing from had largely ignored this crucial distinction. It had to after all to engage in barbaric practice of slavery and its equally inhumane practices of structural inequalities and violence. To this end, King was a patient teacher reminding us that re-learning our traditions would require much effort. Socrates, Ghandi, Malcom X, Medgar Evers and eventually King would pay with their very lives. For most, this relearning our own tradition would just mean a moment or two of cognitive dissonance.

“Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.”

Having grounded his action of civil disobedience firmly within the Western project of assimilating the individual within the political, King has outflanked his critics on both the left and right with a call to collective action. From the left, he demonstrates that the status quo tools of Western politics are indeed deeply revolutionary and that the collectivist rhetoric are part of all political discourse; from the right, that there is nothing extreme nor out-of-the-ordinary to such a claim of civil disobedience by grounding resistance on the sanctity of the individual conscience. Indeed, as I have argued and demonstrated such a tactic is at the very heart of the Western project. Dare I say it is its very soul? King knew the philosophical tradition better than his opponents did and, one assumes, better than many of his allies. By uniting the individual within the collective, King calls for a collective liberation. We often hear that none is truly free if anyone anywhere is not free and this takes a deeper meaning for King and presumably for us.

King’s civil disobedience forms a noble lineage directly from Socrates. King directly mentions Socrates three times in his short letter to the editor. He not only mentions Socrates but he also references other figures central to the Western philosophical tradition including Aquinas, Augustine, Martin Buber, John Bunyan, Thomas Jefferson, Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther, Paul, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr⁵. King’s approach starting with Socrates is filtered through two other central figure he does not mention in the letter but do play an important function for King, Henry David Thoreau and Mohandas Gandhi. What began with

⁵ For an interesting essay on King’s other influences see <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanraab/2014/01/20/10-people-who-inspired-martin-luther-king-and-he-hoped-would-inspire-us/#620b99d979c2>

Socrates will eventually end up in a comic book. In fact, instead of being a revolutionary document or radical manifesto outside the mainstream of Western thought, King's letter reads more like an endorsement of the Great Books of Western Civilization. It is time to place this approach within the mainstream of the Western philosophical tradition where it belongs. In short, the MLK's of the world are the conservatives harkening back to an august tradition; whereas, the Bull Connors and Donald Trumps of the world are the radical extremists acting in ignorance and without either rational support or justification and undermining the Western traditions of liberty, individual rights, justice and law we all hold central.

In closing, King's rigorous intellectual foundations are built upon the philosophic project and by speaking so stridently and so well, he reawakens the moral obligations to conscience each of us is called to toward collective liberation. A civilization of laws, after all, is where we all are allowed to flourish.

Collective Liberation:

A Journey From the Past, Through the Present, and Into the Future

By Lara Scott, Associate Director Campus Ministry for Community Service, Move Office

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” Lilla Watson.

I grew up involved with community service from a young age. Over time, I have come to understand the kind of service I participated in as akin to charity. I remember hearing over and over, “This is what we do. It is not right that some do not have what they need and some are treated poorly.” What a beautiful intention and purpose behind connecting to the community and supporting others. An incredibly kind and thoughtful intention to be thankful for what I had, to acknowledge that not everyone experienced our community the same way, and to give something back to the community that gave to me. While my first introduction to service did not provide me with terribly helpful language or a robust understanding of my community, I continue to appreciate the elements of action and using your voice for change that were always present. I also appreciate the acknowledgement of injustice being part of the service picture. The other foundational element that was present, without question, was a focus on the importance of maintaining dignity for all. This principle continues to guide both my service and justice work and is a central one articulated through Catholic Social Teaching as well as a pillar for our own Edmundite Center for Peace and Justice.

While I am grateful and appreciative for the consistent connection to service throughout my youth, I did not really understand all that is part of service and what is possible through service until I committed to a year with Mercy Volunteer Corps (MVC) and was challenged to look deeper. This year of service had a four-part foundation of service, justice, spirituality, and simply living. Entering into service in this way offered me tremendous experience and broadened my awareness in innumerable ways. Witnessing incredibly strong women, the Sisters of Mercy, speak boldly about what they believe is right, protest injustice (and be arrested), and serve passionately in their ministries showed me, without doubt, that justice through service is a thing and that it is a powerful change agent. It was inspiring to watch activism and service work hand in hand. It was influential to work with colleagues in my ministry, both Sisters of Mercy and lay people, who initiated conversation about injustice immediately and without apology, rather, with necessity. It was clear from day one that my ministry in an afterschool program was about so much more than creative and fun activities. My “service” ministry was about acknowledging systems of oppression, seeing each other as whole people, and investing in compassionate service and active social change in the community. I was challenged to think about service differently by my colleagues, the children, and multiple community partners. It was through my time with MVC and the Sisters of Mercy that I experienced a bold and direct introduction to collective liberation. I started to learn from the sisters that choosing to stay on my course keeps someone else on theirs but choosing to work toward change, personal and systemic, offers possibility to both/all. My time in MVC started to make so visible the intersections of our lives and the value and dignity in each life that it is nearly impossible for either to be invisible again.

After MVC I had the privilege of going to graduate school in an Education program with a focus on Social Justice. Through that program, there was a lot of introspective work, a big introduction to theory, many many challenging moments between and among classmates, and intentional space to acknowledge parts of my own identity, some for the first time. This experience helped me see the importance of theory and practice working together. I had some powerful practice in both service and justice prior to then, but was only beginning to unfold the theory that accompanied so many of my experiences. I found justice work to be an ongoing process of learning and growth that is both interpersonal and intra-personal. I discovered my belief that I have a *responsibility* to critically examine my own identities to better understand both what they are and how they play out in society. I was, and still am, responsible for seeing and learning about both the privileges I receive and biases I experience because of systems and structures intentionally built for some to benefit and others to not. I needed to explore how my identities and experiences are intertwined with others'. This time in my life, I now see, was a door to a vast wilderness I had yet to explore in such depth and I only wanted more. My graduate work really launched me in a direction of commitment to and engagement with purposeful social justice work. The readings, classroom dialogues, and multiple practical experiences with service and service-learning departments challenged me to see yet another layer of connection between justice and service. Naturally, I came full circle back to my time with the Sisters of Mercy and saw clearly that community service is about making social change, it is about working towards justice by meeting the immediate needs expressed by community members. It is about working with the community to create change that allows all members of the community to benefit. It is about deconstructing injustice so that justice can exist in its fullest expression. Justice through service, as I have come to see it, is about interconnections between the volunteer and the community partner(s).

Following these two transformative experiences, I found my way to and from many different jobs. The connective tissue across many years of work was education. In each professional role, I intentionally sought out ways to connect with justice work. I found myself with opportunities to create trainings and new initiatives, facilitate workshops, participate on committees, include readings and discussions in to class syllabi, etc. Justice work *is* part of my work with students, so it was wonderful to find a way to keep that present. Outside of work, I maintained my commitment to service in the ways I could. Through my own reflections, I was able to continue to grow in my understanding of the connective nature of justice and service. Nonetheless, service was disconnected from my daily practice. For a long time I felt something was missing from my professional life but could not figure out what it was.

Pushing this feeling away, I continued my work in education. A few years later, I was encouraged to apply for a job in Mobilization of Volunteer Efforts (MOVE) here at SMC. I was excited by the possibility but did not fully understand the pull I felt to this work until I walked through the door to interview. As I turned the corner on the first floor of Alliot to walk into MOVE, I was greeted by the following words, "*If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*" All I had come to know about how I understand and believe in justice through service connected in that moment. I realized the interconnectedness of the two that took me over three years to understand had unraveled as I put my professional energy into education and justice and let service devolve into a lesser meaning space in my life. Seeing this quote, in part, got me excited to think about the breadth and depth of service that I believe in and the opportunity to engage in

dialogue about service being so much more than donating cookies. Seeing those words boldly naming the interconnectedness of beings and the necessity of being *with* to make change for the collective we, I saw an invitation. Lilla Watson's words reaffirmed for me that service and justice are intertwined, service is one piece of a much larger spectrum of ways to work toward justice, and service is about the word *with* not the word *for*. The quote at the entrance of the office pulled me in. This philosophy calls me to see service a more than seeking justice for others; it calls me to see my liberation tied to justice for others where service functions as the path towards justice. Service is not the goal, the liberation from oppressive and unjust systems that tie us together is the goal. Seeing these powerful and beautiful words that morning centered me in what I knew I believed but had not found a way to enact.

This understanding of the interconnectedness of collective liberation, justice, and service reflected in the quote has driven and continues to drive my life and work. I have chosen to challenge myself to see my liberation bound up in others' on a daily basis. As an educator and director of MOVE, I chose to take on the challenge to learn, to teach, and to work to make change on a level larger than myself. I am not typically the person on the front lines of a protest, maybe I will be some day, but walking through that quote each day, I hold myself accountable to working towards justice through service. I believe there is a spectrum of ways to work for liberation and justice and all are needed in our communities. I may not be the loudest voice, but I try to be regular and consistent by becoming more and more willing to engage in difficult justice-oriented conversations, ask hard questions, push through my nervously beating heart and say what scares me, challenge my family and friends, and regularly talk with my three year old daughter about the realities of our world and my goals for the future.

If nothing else in this world opened my eyes to what it means for my liberation to be bound with others', being a mother has. Being a mom has been a tremendous driving force in taking a leap to be part of deconstructing unjust systems, understanding and naming macroaggressions, acknowledging and talking about those systems that we may benefit from and by which others are potentially hurt, and being present with my community working towards a more just world. I work, if not for my liberation, to ensure that she is less bound by the systems of injustice that dominate our world. These are the same systems that, if nothing changes, may not allow her to know and proudly celebrate all of who she is. I work toward her liberation. As I entertain her many questions, I see them as open doors to start conversations and stop silence. They are opportunities to dismantle inaccuracies, bias, and oppressive thoughts or acts. My three year old and her friends have the opportunity to see and experience our world differently and I am going to be part of making that happen. It has been a long road of learning and growing, including a ton of mistakes. The journey has brought me to a moment where I am willing to walk through that quote every day and take on the challenge and responsibility it offers...and the journey will continue.

The Spirit of Ubuntu: Solidarity, Love, & Collective Liberation By Professor Katherine Kirby, PhD., Philosophy & Global Studies

“Ubuntu...speaks of the very essence of being human....It is to say, ‘My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life.” (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*)

I want to begin my reflections on collective liberation by speaking of moments in time that I remember from my childhood. These are moments when I learned something about the crushing inequities in our world or the big and small struggles that others face. They are moments when I had an insight about my place and my responsibility, or when I felt a feeling that was big and important and revelatory. The meaning I see in these moments now, in the present, is often more than I fully understood at the time. The bigger picture that these moments create, and many other moments since, reflects the development of an as-yet-incomplete but ever-growing understanding of human community, and a strong and deep desire for solidarity, for a life of love and compassion and community, and for the pursuit of a revolutionary, collective liberation.

The Impossibility of Standing Apart: Lessons from My Childhood

For as long as I can remember, my heart has been pulled toward others who I perceive as being harmed or neglected or treated unfairly. I remember my friend Nathan, in kindergarten, who got picked on a lot for his stutter and a few other unusual things about him, and I remember feeling pulled to look out for him and stick up for him, and simply to be his friend. I could not understand how people could be so mean to someone so kind, just because, in some small ways, he wasn't like everyone else.

I remember Earl, a friend of my Uncle John's who came to my Grandmother's house for our all-day Easter party one year. I think he might have been the first black man I had ever met in this kind of personal way, and he was blind and deaf. That day is crystal-clear in my memory, even though I was only around 7 or 8 years old – watching my uncle finger-spell into his hand, writing in capital letters on his shoulder to communicate with him myself, and listening to him speak, with rapt attention, all afternoon, while my sisters and cousins played somewhere else in the house. I remember bursting into tears toward the end of that day, because I was just completely overwhelmed by the feelings I was having in Earl's presence. I remember wondering what his life was like, and imagining all of the obstacles and struggles he must face in his day-to-day life – living alone in Washington, DC, making his way to work every day (I learned that he worked at the Library of Congress), and just doing all the things people do, without being able to see or hear anything. At the time, I did not know enough to consider the racism he likely faced, as well. I remember writing about him for school, and learning to finger-spell for the next time I would see him, and baking him chocolate-chip cookies, and talking on the phone with him a few times a year for many years, through a special phone interpreter system they had back then. I still have the *Braille Reader's Digest* and the mechanical Christmas toys he gave me, and I cherish these as reminders of this man who had such a big impact on me.

I remember learning about the famine in Ethiopia and my Dad taking me to participate in “Hands Across America” when I was somewhere around 8-years-old. I was transfixed by the

TV footage of people who were starving, and I cried hearing my favorite singers ask the world to do something in “We are the World.” And I remember bawling my eyes out when I was around 11, watching a 20-20 *Special* on kids with severe disabilities abandoned in orphanages in Romania, and a man who gave up his fancy law practice to devote his life to finding families for them.

Of course, there have been many more such experiences and encounters over the years that have deeply touched me, and taught me, and shaped me. These are simply some of the earliest big ones that I remember. What I recall most vividly about them was the complex and overpowering web of feelings that washed over me, and compelled me, and filled me up. Most intense and most profound was the feeling that I could not simply turn away to live my own life, despite the difficulty and pain that came with being present. I don’t quite know how to say it, other than to say that I felt completely *part of* the relationship with Nathan, with Earl, and even with the strangers I was seeing in Ethiopia and Romania. I remember feeling a deep pain in witnessing their struggles, and I knew – not in an intellectual way, but in a deeper, more primordial way – that my own life was fundamentally part of theirs, and that meant that I had to give them my attention, my care, my time, my *self*. I had to stand with them, and be with them, in whatever way I could. And I *wanted to*. I believe that this interwovenness – this inability to stand apart from others – lies at the heart of collective liberation.

Individualism, Self-Pursuit, and Life as a Half-Self

I believe that the enculturation that we undergo – all the lessons that teach us who we are, and how we must be, and how we ought to live with one other – is fundamentally flawed in our society. The flaw lies in our culture’s emphasis on individualism and the prioritization of the rights and liberties of the individual as opposed to collectivism and the prioritization of responsibility and human sociality. In our society, and in much of Western society, we are taught that our fundamental human drive is to care for the self – to seek and preserve one’s own existence, to pursue one’s own life, and to protect oneself. Ethical engagement is often explained as refraining from getting in anyone else’s way as they pursue the same independent self-creation. I do not doubt that this dimension of our human existence is real. But is this all there is to human living?

Such individualistic self-pursuit (and the ethics of mere non-interference that often results) strikes me as an impoverished and amputated way of living, suffocating a dimension of ourselves that is capable of more. If self-pursuit is all we cultivate, I believe we become *half-selves*, starving and choking out the other core dimension of human life. There is equally within us the social, the communal, the loving, the compassionate, and the generous self that is *always, already in relation to others*. It is this part of the self that makes possible the tremendous potential within every person to give, to love, to sacrifice for others, to share, and to see the infinite beauty in each other person and to prioritize what is good for them – or prioritize the good of the whole – over what is only good for oneself. It is the part of the self that, when fed – when cultivated – is an opening of the heart to others, to be drawn, to be compelled, to be more fully what I can potentially be, as a human person.

But this is not what our society seems to value or teach us. In our individualism and self-pursuit, I see us sinking into an indifference toward others that breeds isolation, neglect, and complicity in the inequities and injustices that have always characterized our society. This indifference surely does harm to other persons, as it reduces them to mere *objects* in the world of

the self, rather than human Subjects with dignity and worth that commands my concerned attention. This indifference is always, at the same time, a harm to myself, as well. It is likewise a reduction of the self, for it deadens the fundamental and beautiful part of the self that is capable of sociality and solidarity. I become less than what I am meant to be, as a human being. My vision is clouded, my mind becomes closed, and my heart becomes hardened such that I no longer feel anything in the presence of another person's suffering. My soul shrivels. I become a half-self.

Power, Dominance, and Unfreedom for All

Let us be frank about our society. We live in a world that is stratified, where dominant groups are afforded power, influence, and innumerable practical benefits, and non-dominant groups are denied these. We (that is, those who have power in our society) created it to be this way, and we have never done the hard work of un-creating this, or of dismantling it and creating something new and equitable and just. Yes, some laws have been changed. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. explains in *Where Do We Go From Here?*, we – especially white Americans – grew complacent after seeing legal victories, and even those of us committed to racial justice fail to see that there is more work to be done. Many thinkers and writers of color have explained that the reality is that those of us who are afforded power in an oppressive system do not actually want that system to change because it benefits us. Of course, this is often not something we are consciously aware of. It is simply that we are happy with the status quo, because we have no reason not to be, so we fail to critique or resist it.

In our complacency, we are not neutral, though it likely feels that way. In our complacency, in our indifference, and in our failure to resist a system of domination, we participate in it. We go along with it. As beneficiaries. Our participation and non-resistance supports it. Ph.D. philosopher and civil rights hero Angela Davis taught a course at UCLA in 1969, and the first two lectures are published as “Lectures on Liberation.” She explains that our society follows the Hegelian master/slave relationship, wherein neither party is free. The master's status as dominant radically depends on the subjugation of the slave, and that dependence marks an unfreedom. Yes, in terms of practical freedoms and benefits, it is obvious that the colonized or oppressed person is unfree in ways that the colonizer or the oppressor is free. But in reality, *both parties are radically bound by, and to, the system of oppression.*

In such a society like ours, structured around domination and a hierarchy of power, I (as one who is advantaged by my society) might feel like there is only benefit in my position. In reality, I am conscripted. Before I knew what was happening, I was taught to play a role. I was taught, often implicitly and covertly and even unintentionally, that this was who I am and how I should be and how I should relate to the system. This is not freedom. It *feels like* freedom because I don't face the practical obstacles and barriers that are faced by someone who is oppressed by the structures of domination in our society. But insofar as I have been taught to unconsciously and uncritically play the role of oppressor simply by going along with a system that harms so many who are forced into the role of the oppressed, I am not free. Both the oppressed and the oppressor are imprisoned within the system of domination. Further, as Davis explains, the one who is oppressed is more likely to see and know and understand her unfreedom, and she thus achieves a *mental liberation* that the oppressor does not. She understands the reality of things, while the oppressor believes herself to be free and thus remains mentally trapped in an illusion.

Please do not misunderstand what I'm saying. I am most certainly *not* suggesting that my situation – as one who has power and advantage in our society – is comparable to the oppression of those subjugated by our society. Privilege is real and undeniable and powerful. But I am a half-self insofar as I uncritically comply with my oppressive society rather than resist it. That is not freedom and fullness of being. That is an unfreedom that we (those with privilege) are choosing, day-in and day-out, whether we do so consciously or not.

Collective Liberation, Self-Recovery, and the Spirit of Ubuntu

Collective liberation is the radical idea that none of us are free until we are all free. My freedom is bound to yours. It rests on an understanding of human society as *collective* and a recognition that we are all inextricably linked and connected to one another, such that harm done to any one of us harms us all, and when any one in our community or society suffers, we all suffer. As King says in “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Collective liberation certainly does recognize the multiple spaces in which oppression occurs – race, ethnicity, economic class, gender, sexuality, disability, illness, age, etc. It recognizes that I can be privileged in some ways and disadvantaged in others, and that there can be a compounding of disadvantage and struggle where multiple oppressions befall a person. Collective liberation creates space for all inequities and oppressions to be addressed.

But what makes collective liberation such a radical prospect is that it challenges us to see that, even in the ways in which we are given *advantages* by our particular social construct, in our living-out of those advantages, we succumb to the system, and thus we become bound and imprisoned by it. We go along with it. We give ourselves to that system of oppression. bell hooks tells us, in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, that, in a society shaped by dominance, *all of our minds have been colonized*, as we are taught to conform to our places in our society. Collective liberation challenges the *illusion* of freedom held by those who have power and advantage in an oppressive society. It calls us to break free of this system of dominance – to see it, to understand it, to refuse it, to resist it, to dismantle it – for the sake of those who are subjugated by it and for the sake of those who are conscripted into the role of subjugator. I want to abolish our oppressive social structures in order to stop the harm done to people who do not have the advantages I have. But I also want to abolish those systems because I recognize that I am harmed, too, albeit in a different way.

As hooks explains, “Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that self-recovery is ultimately about learning to see clearly....It is the way to freedom for both the colonized and the colonizer” (*Killing Rage*). Those of us who are advantaged in our society must see clearly the complicity in our self-interested pursuits and our indifference to oppression, and we must see clearly the ways in which we, too, are rendered unfree in that complicity and conformity. I believe that this self-recovery requires a re-awakening and a cultivation of the core dimension of the self that I described earlier – that beautiful part of the self that is capable of seeing clearly our interconnectedness and our responsibility for others. The Nguni Bantu concept of Ubuntu captures this sense of oneness and interdependence. Often translated as “I am because you are,” or “I am because we are,” the concept of Ubuntu is precisely the idea that I

cannot be well, and I cannot be whole, while any person in my community suffers. This, I believe, is the guiding insight of collective liberation. We will only be free when we are *all free*.

Indigenous Australian visual artist, academic, and activist Lilla Watson famously said, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Indeed, let us get to work, together.

The Truth Shall Set You Free: The Prophetic Call to Collective Liberation by Reverend Michael Carter, Edmundite Society

Does a prophet speak on the behalf of the Divine? Do we only listen to a prophet if we like the message, if the message reinforces what we already believe to be true? Do we revere a prophet who reinforces our inaction and inertia? What if the message of a prophet struck to our deepest core, and began for us a life-long, never-ending journey in pursuit of *true* freedom, for ourselves and others, by putting us into a challenging space and allowing us to allow *ourselves* to grow and change? Writing as a white man in America, I have the luxury of viewing racial injustice in an academic way, a scourge to be combatted by others as I nod approvingly from the sidelines. It's not my battle to fight I could say, it doesn't directly affect me. Since there are certain things I can never know, perhaps I could live my life giving tacit support to the efforts of justice while continuing to reap the rewards of an unjust system that my privilege will allow me to indulge. I could (falsely) tell myself that since I personally do not need to be freed from oppression, I will view everything as external. What I have only recently and slowly begun to realize is that my own life, my own thoughts and perceptions, are tied up in the very same system of injustice that some feel explicitly. As a person of privilege, what if I heeded a prophet's words to think about my own role in oppression? What if I strove to understand the violence of a whole structural culture that keeps all of us cowed, covertly and overtly? What if I let my individuality slip away into the collective need for liberation of our whole society, our whole world? Being privileged while others suffer also saps the soul, and calls for an end to idleness. Will I have the humility to hear and follow this call, and realize that my heart needs to change alongside the struggles and sacrifices of others?

As I am writing this, my Roman Catholic faith tradition is celebrating the Epiphany of the Lord; a moment where the meaning and mission of Jesus Christ became clear to the world. This understanding and realization did not come easily. As Jesus came to the world as a savior, offering liberation to all, he also spoke the truth of a prophet, with all the hardships that necessitates. One of the messages of a prophet is a conversion of heart; an understanding that long held beliefs and perceptions will be unsustainable if the prophet's call is to be heeded. Before I and others in my position speak, we would be wise to follow the prophet's call to reflect. In some ways, making space for that contemplation already requires a step away from privilege, in this case the particularly American privilege of individualism. Collective liberation must take into account collective needs. Yes, I need to reflect on my own identity, my own roles, the functions and appearances that I make in the world. But I must then think of the experiences of others, how they differ, how my comfort is in many ways predicated on the pain of others. I must strive to understand the experiences of others, not to arrogantly claim that I CAN fully understand their pain, not to assume that I CAN ever put myself in their position, but to seek to grow humbly in knowledge of what I CAN'T know, so that I may better walk with others and realize that there is so much that will never be clear to me, experiences that I will not be able to claim to share. Living in the realization of my own inability to know, to be freed from the constraining thought that all CAN be known, will open up space to be able to acknowledge other realities. In knowing my place within a larger context, I can hope to understand the places of others, and walk with them as they fight for what is theirs, as we all fight.

If truly followed, this has radical ramifications as it presents, in truth, an essence of the Christian message. This message has always emphasized a contemplation of the unknown, the immensity of God. In order to reach any understanding at all requires continual searching and striving, self-emptying, self-reflection, self-critique, all leading towards the eventual goal of recognizing how we fit in a larger framework. The Prophet Isaiah writes that our society is akin to “a darkness that covers the earth, thick clouds covering the people.” In many ways our own society works very hard to mask the fact that there can be more that unites us than separates us, that we can thrive off of each other’s happiness and not each other’s misery, and that our common human destiny requires us to be present to and work with each other as humans, all on an equal plane. On an individual level, my first steps will therefore need to include a position of humility: recognizing that my own views and perspectives are conditioned by my own lived reality. To be freed from reliance on a limited perspective, to realize that the thoughts, views, struggles and experiences of others are essential to an enriched understanding, not only of personal experiences, but of *human* experiences needs to be the path forward. St. Anselm wrote in the Middle Ages that his study of theology, the study of what he believed would ultimately sustain him, transform him and free him, could be encapsulated as “faith seeking understanding.” Seeking to understand the perspectives of people who have different life experiences is a gateway to freedom, as when all points of view are taken into account, it is only then that a truly equitable and just system will be made possible for us all, a realization (to put it into prophetic terms) of the Kingdom of God.

It takes a prophetic voice to tell us that a position of comfort comes at the expense of others. It takes a prophetic voice to bring us to the truth: that our life journeys need to be informed by a constant self-examination, self-reflection, and openness to the cries of others. Too often we are discouraged from walking with others, validating their experiences. We are told to be complacent in our security and in our sense of our own righteousness. We need prophetic voices to tell us that true love, true connection, can only come from being present to each other in all of our complexities. If only I had earlier understood that these prophets, these people who sacrifice all to show us the way, hold a deeper and more instructive lesson for all of us. Creation does not inherently want us to become sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying. When, however, some individuals live a truly authentic life, our own eminently human feelings can’t handle the disconnect, can’t handle the sensibility that some people choose to be actuated by hope instead of despair, by love instead of hate, and as a result we opt to silence these voices through violence. Names like Martin Luther King, or perhaps Jesus Christ himself flit through my mind, as well as the endless arrays of saints, so crucial to my sense of tradition and spirituality, many of whom are staring at me from my office walls as I write these words. It wasn’t until I opened my mind to the reality of the good works that other people in my life and in my orbit accomplished on a daily basis that I was able to rip saints and prophets down from their stained glass prisons, and understand that saints as people were not just ossified figures, that love as an emotion is not just an outmoded ideal that is only transcribed in the pages of a dusty book that I read wistfully on some Sunday when I stumble confusedly into church. The evil in my life was kept at bay by living saints who grew food for neighbors, who marched for racial justice, who fought for the health of their city, who offered me a kind word without any thought of reward.

Love is a strong emotion, and the people who illustrated true love for me are the ones that revealed that love is more concretely a form of action, just as hope cannot merely be unfulfilled longing, begging and pleading with all our might for answers that will never come. Love must be

committing to action, love is living in the world you want to exist regardless of the cost, love is the belief that our happiness and our self-definition are stronger than our misery and despair, and that our authentically chosen lives are in accord with Divine intention. Love is an equal space for all. Love, like all forms of truth, can set us free. We all need to work towards this freedom by recognizing that it will require a change in our own actions and perspectives. It will require heeding the prophetic voice.

‘Resistance is what love looks like in the face of hate. Resistance is what love looks like in the face of violence.’

—THE REV. WILLIAM G. SINKFORD,

