

Building a Bigger We:

A Conversation about Restorative Justice Movement Building

Rose Elizondo and Jovida Ross

What follows is a written conversation between us. The seeds of this conversation were planted on a five-hour drive along Highway 99. We drove from Oakland, California, to a state prison in the Central Valley to participate in a restorative circle. This stretch of highway is California's prison corridor: 15 of the state's 34 prisons stand along this stretch in fields where farm workers once harvested produce. Seeing busses transporting incarcerated people to these prisons is like witnessing a modern day "middle passage."¹

John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, was inspired by what he saw in this valley; the novel explores the injustices of the time to discover deeper lessons. The prisons that now fill this landscape create a new generation of grapes of wrath. The punitive practices of the criminal legal system² in the United States harm individuals, families, and communities.³ The criminalization of poverty and trauma, along with biases in law enforcement, create a

¹ For an exploration of how mass incarceration mirrors and extends the practice of slavery in the United States, see Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1-59558-103-7.

² We intentionally use the phrase criminal legal system, rather than criminal justice system, because the current system perpetuates so much injustice. We intend this to refer to all aspects of law enforcement, including policing, prosecution, sentencing, incarceration, and parole.

³ For more on how incarceration is harmful to families and communities, see Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi. *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*. Oakland, CA: Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design, 2015. Available at <http://whopaysreport.org>, and Wagner, Peter, and Leah Sakala. *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie*. A Prison Policy Initiative briefing. 2016. Available at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org>.

disproportionate impact on communities of color, along with transgender and queer people,⁴ making visible the patterns of oppression that our communities face in daily life.

When we are accustomed to the status quo, we often become numb to the injustices that surround us. We might drive down the highway and see the signs for the prisons, but not understand their impact. If we don't recognize the impacts of injustice we can replicate oppression in our own actions. We see this happening within well-intentioned efforts to spread restorative justice practices. The stories and principles we share here are chosen to highlight the strengths of restorative justice values and practices, and to emphasize how incorporating social justice movement-building principles into restorative justice practices could enhance the transformative impact of these efforts.

These insights are drawn from our work. Rose Elizondo is a long-time restorative justice practitioner, with 14 years of creating and sustaining innovative restorative programs in schools, also co-founding the San Quentin Restorative Justice Interfaith Roundtable,⁵ and being an innovator in community work with the North Oakland Restorative Justice Council.⁶ Rose is a 2017 Soros Justice Fellow. Jovida Ross has been involved with gender justice movements for more than two decades; since 2012 she has worked with Movement Strategy Center (MSC),

⁴ Transgender and queer people are overrepresented in the prison system and are particularly vulnerable to abuse by police in communities and by law enforcement in custodial settings. See: "The Unfair Criminalization of Gay and Transgender Youth" Jerome Hunt and Aisha C. Moodie-Mills. Available: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/reports/2012/06/29/11730/the-unfair-criminalization-of-gay-and-transgender-youth/>, accessed 5/15/17, and "Standing With LGBT Prisoners: An Advocate's Guide to Ending Abuse and Combating Imprisonment." National Center for Transgender Equality, 12 Feb. 2015. Web. Available: <http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/standing-lgbt-prisoners-advocate-s-guide-ending-abuse-and-combatin-g-imprisonment>, accessed 5/15/17.

⁵ Learn more about the San Quentin Restorative Justice Interfaith Roundtable in this article: Haines, Juan. "Restorative Justice Program Lets the Healing Begin." San Quentin News. 12/10/10. Available: <http://sanquentinnews.com/restorative-justice-program-lets-the-healing-begin>.

⁶ To learn more about the North Oakland Restorative Justice Council, see Pierce, Molly. *What's the alternative? Restorative justice group discusses getting youth out of the courts.* Oakland North. 11/19/14. Available: <http://oaklandnorth.net/2014/11/19/whats-the-alternative-restorative-justice-group-discusses-getting-youth-out-of-the-courts>.

where she leads MSC's cross-movement learning and strategy process called the Transitions Initiative.⁷

Social justice movements are collective journeys that take us towards a better world. Building a movement is a process of building a bigger 'We' because shared values and relationships are a key to how movements create change.⁸ Intentional reflection on our values and relationships can help us build our movement and create the world we want. Throughout this conversation we offer questions to reflect on restorative justice movement-building practices, to learn through self-awareness, and to strengthen our movement.⁹

Restorative Justice As a Way of Life

Rose: It began with love, it began with loss. The North Oakland Restorative Justice Council (NORJC) started in 2013 through the process of grieving the homicide of a young mother named Donitra Henderson. She was shot near Dover Park in front of her four-year-old son. In shock and grief we gathered family and friends, faith-based leaders, community members, survivors of crime, and people who had spent time in prison for taking a life. Our collective response was to

⁷ Movement Strategy Center (MSC) was started in 2001 to help social justice movements be strategic, collaborative, and sustainable. Since then, the team at MSC has worked with many networks and alliances across different social justice movements. In 2014, MSC launched the Transitions Initiative, a process designed to build multi-systems social change grounded in relationships and personal transformation. The movement building principles shared here come from MSC's work across movements, with gratitude to the people who have led social justice movements and demonstrated these principles in action. Learn more about the work of Movement Strategy Center and access resources to support movement-building on MSC's web site at www.movementstrategy.org.

⁸ "Transformative movements recognize that everything gets done through relationships and nothing gets done without them. We are interrelated and interconnected. A 'bigger we' includes the realization that movements are about people and cultures, our relationships to each other and to the planet." Movement Strategy Center, *The Practices of Transformative Movements*. June 2016. Available online: movementstrategy.org/b/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MSC-Practices_of_Transformative_Movements-WEB.pdf

⁹ These reflection questions are based on questions that Movement Strategy Center has developed to support movement-builders, which we have customized in this essay specifically for a restorative justice context.

have a ceremonial tree planting, a potluck lunch, and talking circles. A Baptist minister shared stories about Donitra. A cousin shared how Donitra taught him his 123s and ABCs. African water libations created a sacred space. One by one, we offered shovels full of earth to plant a plum tree near the very place where Donitra's spirit went to a different realm. A spray-painted mural recreated her smiling grin on the redwood fence. In our talking circle, we each voiced what we could do to help bring about change in the community. As we did this, we co-created a circular altar with roses, sunflowers, pinecones, medicinal herbs, candles, and songs, in the tradition of Mexican indigenous people. Through these rituals, we created relationships. The community asked for more gatherings and to learn about restorative justice. Then several of us co-founded the NORJC to explore ways we can use restorative justice to transform harm into healing and put the “neighbor” back in the “hood.”

Jovida: What a powerful response to tragedy. It conveys a sense of possibility. What if responses to harm supported healing and learning in everyday life? What if the skills to respond to harm restoratively were widespread? This possibility also connects with my own exploration, with the community connected with MSC’s Transitions Initiative, and with how we can collectively transition from a world of domination and extraction to one of regeneration, resilience, and interdependence.

Rose: Restorative justice can be part of that transition! Envisioning an alternative to retributive or punishing systems that operate in our schools, criminal legal system, and communities is what energizes my community restorative justice work with the NORJC. As my mentor, Fania Davis

(co-founder of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth) states, "We harm people who harm people to show that harming people is wrong. Yet we know that if they are not healed, harmed people go on to harm other people."¹⁰ Fania helped me realize the importance of weaving together personal and interpersonal healing, with advocacy and community healing, while using a cultural framework. We need more than individual healers; we need community and societal healers who empower those most impacted by abusive systems to lead the way toward justice.

Visioning Justice that Heals Harms

Jovida: To lead the way, we need to have a sense of the world we want to create. When I was working with Community United Against Violence (CUAV) I learned that anger and protest can be powerful motivators, but they won't ultimately take us to where we want to go. CUAV was the first organization in the country to focus specifically on violence against and within lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities, including violence perpetrated by police.¹¹ When I worked there we celebrated the organization's 30th anniversary. Looking back over those 30 years, we noticed how the rates of violence that our communities experienced had not gone down. We realized we had focused so much on stopping what we didn't want, that we had not identified what we wanted *instead of* violence. We need to have long-term vision and goals to help us proactively create the world we want.

¹⁰ Learn more about Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, or RJOY, at <http://rjoyoakland.org>.

¹¹ Learn more about Community United Against Violence or CUAV at www.cuav.org.

Rose: My long-term vision is about creating a future inspired by my ancestral traditions. Restorative justice is rooted in the values held within many indigenous cultures, including the recognition of our interdependence. To practice restorative justice involves making a fundamental shift in our thinking and actions. In 2010, I had a conversation with Van Jones, co-founder of the Ella Baker Center,¹² where he shared his perspective: “Justice is served when the victim is made whole, the transgressor is redeemed, and harmony is restored to the community.” One of the main principles of restorative justice is that everything is interconnected. If we live by this principle, we realize that we each have keys to one another's healing and liberation. Your healing is my healing, and my healing is your healing. By healing myself, I am working on societal healing, and by advocating for policy change to heal social injustices, I heal others and myself. As communities and as a broader movement, restorative justice creates structures, policies, and practices of justice that heal harms and address the needs and obligations arising from those harms.

Jovida: This seems like a true definition of justice. The way our current legal system works does not feel like justice.

Rose: In our current system, when harm happens and the case goes through the legal process, the state takes on the position of the harmed party. This takes away the power of the person who was harmed whose needs are not a primary consideration in the legal proceedings. Instead, the focus is retribution against the person who caused the harm and how they will be punished. A

¹² Learn more about the Ella Baker Center at <http://ellabakercenter.org>.

restorative approach looks at how everyone's needs can be met. For example, if there was a robbery, we bring people together, including the person who was robbed, the person who did the robbery, and maybe neighbors who are now afraid because there was a robbery next door. We especially explore the needs of the person who was robbed. It gives them a sense of power. They might think, "I was robbed, yet this process is validating my experience. I can get my questions answered, I can express what I need, and I may be able to get my stolen belongings back."

Jovida: That really resonates with me. As you know, I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. When I first began sharing this as a teen I could tell that if the state got involved, I wouldn't have a say in what happened. Fortunately I had adults in my life who supported me to respond outside the legal system. The approach you described feels so *whole*. It makes me wish that everyone who has ever been hurt could experience that kind of response.

Rose: That might be why restorative justice is expanding quickly in the United States. Returning to wholeness is the goal of peacemaking practices in Native American /Alaskan communities. Many people do not realize how the way we practice restorative justice in the United States draws on ancient and modern peacemaking traditions and practices of many tribes, including the Diné, Lakota, and Tlingit.¹³ In non-tribal communities during the 1970s and 1980s, variations of Native peacemaking practices, like circles, were brought into public institutions and called "restorative justice." The cultural context and nuances were lost because western values still

¹³ Resources to learn more about peacemaking practices of the the Diné people include Austin, Raymond D. *Navajo Courts and Navajo Common Law: A Tradition of Tribal Self-Governance*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. and Yazzie, Robert. "Life Comes From It: Navajo Justice." *The Ecology of Justice*. Context Institute, 1994 and 1997, available online: www.context.org/iclib/ic38/yazzie/.

prevail in those settings. Now, many schools and school districts are implementing restorative circles and restorative approaches to discipline.¹⁴ In the juvenile system, restorative community conferences offer promising alternatives for addressing wrongdoing and diverting youth away from the criminal legal system while still holding them accountable.¹⁵ In adult criminal cases, restorative justice practices are sometimes used after sentencing. Community restorative justice is also emerging! The North Oakland Restorative Justice Council is blazing a pathway towards community healing after crime or harm occurs. Innovative visions led by those closest to the problems are flipping retributive narratives. The hope is that these varied approaches will grow and provide holistic alternatives to the current punitive system.

Reflection: We invite readers to consider how to proactively lead out with their vision for the world. *Imagine a world where responses to harm create healing and restore relationships. What are the qualities of that world? What would family life be like, or schools, or communities, if the skills to respond to harm restoratively were widespread?*

Linking Personal and Political Transformation

Jovida: It is exciting to think about accountability and community-building replacing punishment. Gender justice movements taught me that healing and collective liberation are part of the same process: the personal is political. Successful social justice movements impact all

¹⁴ For example, Frey, Susan. "Oakland ends suspensions for willful defiance, funds restorative justice." *EdSource*. May 14, 2015. Available online:

<https://edsources.org/2015/oakland-ends-suspensions-for-willful-defiance-funds-restorative-justice/79731>.

¹⁵ For example, Community Works West offers Restorative Community Conferences, learn more at <http://communityworkswest.org>.

aspects of our lives. They shift the way we live, the way we think about ourselves, our socio-political systems and structures, and our culture.¹⁶ It seems like restorative practices hold this possibility. I understand that folks exploring *transformative justice* are considering how healing the impact of violence and trauma is inherently connected with shifting oppressive social conditions.¹⁷ At Movement Strategy Center we are exploring how building social and political power is connected with repairing the harm of trauma; particularly, the impacts of historical traumas such as slavery and genocide.

Rose: Yes, I feel that restorative justice will become a powerful movement when it spreads beyond the court system and schools, into workplaces, neighborhoods and everyday life. Conflict is a natural part of being human. There is an internal shift when we approach conflict in a life-giving way. A question I always ask myself is, “In this moment, am I being a *healer*, or am I being a *jailer* (that is, being punitive)?” We can ask ourselves this simple question whether it is in a personal interaction, with a group, or as a society. We have a choice in every moment. I know the transformative power of this shift because I have experienced it many times. Sometimes, in order to transcend punishment, we need to embrace our own goodness and see goodness reflected in others.

I grew up in South Texas in the 1960s and 70s when the United Farm Workers Movement was very active. Farm workers are paid meager wages and often work in terrible

¹⁶ Gratitude to Julie Quiroz and Kristen Zimmerman, who first articulated a version of this thought in *Love with Power: Practicing Transformation for Social Justice*. Published by Movement Strategy Center, May 2016, available online: http://movementstrategy.org/b/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MSC-Love_With_Power.pdf.

¹⁷ For more on how transformative justice practitioners are connecting healing *trauma* and healing *structural oppression*, see the Zehr Institute Webinar: Transformative Justice, held February 15 2017, with RJ Maccani, Nathaniel Shara, and Ejeris Dixon, posted online: <http://zehr-institute.org/webinar/transformative-justice>.

conditions that are essentially economic enslavement. These drastic disparities of power and control, with racialized political power and religion as a tool of oppression, are painful.

Historical trauma was repeated over many generations and I carry intergenerational trauma in the very cells of my body from it. To counter this internalized inferiority, the farm worker movement developed a sense of cultural power through a beautiful revitalization of Mexican culture. They also created slogans like “*¡Si Se Puede! Yes We Can!*” to shift from internalized oppression to internalized resilience. This transformation came with an assertion of political power using Gandhian nonviolence.¹⁸ It led to an economic shift as the organizing won new rights.

During this time, the Chicaxs recognized that, although we were the majority, the white landowners held the political, religious, and economic power. Willie Velazquez had a vision of Latinxs moving from oppression and silence to having a vote, a voice, and actually leading democratic processes.¹⁹ In small towns across South Texas, Chicaxs registered to vote, ran for office, and won!²⁰ My father became a school board member. His best friend became the mayor. They flipped the apartheid-like model of a few people having power over the masses and demonstrated that we had power in numbers and in resilience. The cells in our bodies were collectively saying “*Si Se Puede.*”

In the community justice work I am doing in North Oakland, we were inspired by these Chicax political activists. We recently organized to put community members in leadership

¹⁸ The leaders of the farm worker movement, including César Chavez, studied the nonviolent approach that Gandhi promoted as well as the way it had been taken up in the U.S. by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and intentionally employed nonviolent tactics. This is detailed in Orosco, José-Antonio. *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

¹⁹ Willie Velazquez’s vision is portrayed in the documentary, *Willie Velazquez: Your Vote is Your Voice*. Directed by Hector Galan. Latino Public Broadcasting, 2016.

²⁰ The obituary for Willie Velazquez published by Reuters notes, “from 1974 when we started to 1987, the number of Hispanic elected officials in the U.S. grew from 1,566 to 3,038, an increase of 82 percent.” June 16, 1988.

positions at the police-sponsored Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC). In Oakland, the NCPCs have provided a space where residents who already have economic and political power can influence the police, while people of color and the poor are further criminalized. Now, Mustafa Solomon and Max Cadji of the Restorative Justice Council in North Oakland co-chair the NCPC. We changed the name to “Neighborhood Care and Promotion Council.” The meetings are about how we can create relationships to know our neighbors, and how we can speak to each other when harm or conflict happens. It is a recent change, so we will see how it plays out.

Reflection: We invite readers to reflect on how we can intentionally link personal and political transformation. *As we promote a cultural shift around justice, what political shifts can help us move towards a vision of justice that heals? How can we actively organize for the systemic changes that will help move us towards that vision?*

Restoring a *Just* Balance of Power

Jovida: In both of those powerful stories above, I hear a defining characteristic of *social justice movements*: they are led by the people who directly experience injustice. The people who feel the impact of a systemic social problem have wisdom to offer around what the problem is and what real solutions might be. When we fully claim and act on this wisdom we reclaim our power.

Your story of the farm worker movement, Rose, illustrates this so well.

For those of us who may be protected from direct experiences of systemic harm it is important to consider how we can support and celebrate the leadership of those who are directly

impacted by that harm. A clear example of this comes from the disability rights movement. In the United States, disability rights advocates popularized the slogan, “*Nothing about us, without us.*”²¹ This statement conveys the power to have direct decision-making authority in one’s own life, and it affirms the dignity of people living with disabilities. In the process of claiming this power, people with disabilities also developed their leadership, built organizations, and won policy changes that benefit many people.²² As an able-bodied person, for example, I don’t know what it is like to navigate a world that is not designed for access in a wheelchair. I can guess or listen, but I don’t have direct experience. If I engage in work promoting accessibility, I would want to take care that my involvement would not take power away from the true leaders of this movement, or else I would be replicating the very social injustices they are working to change.²³ We can support people who are directly impacted by injustice in their leadership, celebrate wins with them, and find joy in experiencing their power. When we take leadership from people who have lived experience with social injustices we create a more inclusive, just world together.²⁴

I think you take this approach already in your work. You talked about your friends and collaborators in North Oakland, like Princess Beverly. Her leadership is a good example.

²¹ Charlton, James I. *Nothing About Us Without Us*. University of California Press, 1998. ISBN 0-520-22481-7.

²² See Glover Blackwell, Angela. “The Curb Cut Effect”. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Winter 2017. Available online: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect.

²³ One group that is leading the way around disability justice is the performance project Sins Invalid. See Lamm, Nomy. “This is Disability Justice.” *The Body is Not an Apology*. September 2015. Available online: <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/this-is-disability-justice>.

²⁴ Involving the human “user” perspective throughout the process of problem-solving is one of the tenets of Human Centered Design (see Thompson, Dave. “Why Human Centered Design Matters.” *Wired*. December 2013. Available online: <https://www.wired.com/insights/2013/12/human-centered-design-matters>). Social justice movements have always taken this approach, and go even further with the idea that those who are directly impacted by an injustice can more effectively *lead the way* towards justice. This is both because lived experience gives insight and wisdom and also because the process of claiming agency and taking leadership towards justice helps restore a more just balance of social power, and in the process addresses some of the root causes of the problems we are seeking to solve.

Rose: Yes, Princess Beverly Williams' story is relevant. She lost her voice when her only son was murdered. She couldn't speak, or work, and depression hit her hard. Her son, Lorenzo Ward, was murdered just blocks from the home where she grew up in North Oakland. She was devastated. The NORJC reached out to her, as a survivor of this violent crime, to ask what her needs were. She said, "It's been 18 months, and I never really had a memorial service." So we threw a memorial block party in honor of her son. Of course we had a circle so that Princess Beverly and others could share stories. Malachi Scott and I introduced the basics of restorative justice and together we planted a fig tree to counter her and the neighbors' memories of violence.

At first, Princess Beverly did not understand restorative justice. She was resistant and expressed anger that her son was gone. Because of her honesty, we started a healing circle for people who have survived homicide. I invited Princess Beverly to co-facilitate. We named the group *Healing our Hearts: You Are Not Alone*, in reference to the Michael Jackson song.²⁵ We used the circle process to listen to each other and we worked on healing through talking circles, cultural traditions, song, and rituals. We also have celebrations so that we don't just focus on the hard experiences. The circle includes people who have lost a family member to long-term incarceration, too. Whether our loved ones have been killed or incarcerated, we have all been impacted by homicide and share experiences of grief and loss. We also host dinners that bring together our group with people who were formerly incarcerated for homicide so that they can hear the truth of each other's experiences.

We meet in Dover Park for our circle. Before the circle, there is an opportunity to work in the Phat Beets community garden and harvest vegetables.²⁶ One day, the godmother of the young

²⁵ *You Are Not Alone* by Michael Jackson, from the album *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*, released August 15, 1995.

²⁶ Learn more about Phat Beets food justice programs at www.phatbeetsproduce.org.

man who killed Lorenzo was in the park. Princess Beverly spoke with her, and his godmother explained how the shooter's mother died when he was very young. She talked about the life of neglect and poverty he had lived through, which led him into gang life. In this conversation the phrase "*Black Lives Matter*" took on new meaning for Princess Beverly. Her son's life mattered, and the young man who shot him needed to matter to someone, too. Princess Beverly shared that compassion filled her heart when she heard his story. Now restorative justice made sense. She was being called to live it, to heal, and to even offer healing.

Princess Beverly was frustrated when her son's case was going through court. The court did not keep her updated about the dates and times of the trial, and she had to miss work to attend the emotionally painful proceedings. To demonstrate our support, the members of the NORJC showed up at the courtroom in purple t-shirts with photos of Lorenzo printed on them. She wrote a powerful victim impact statement to be read in court, honoring Lorenzo, which included principles of restorative justice as well as values from the Movement for Black Lives.²⁷ In the statement she spoke to the young man who killed her son and said, "The bullet that took Lorenzo's life will always connect our two families. I can't forgive you now. You really hurt me, and you hurt our community. From my learning about the restorative side of justice, and from my spiritual beliefs, I know forgiveness is needed. I just don't know how to do that yet. I'm getting support to help me in the healing process, and I want you to have a healing journey, too."

²⁷ For information on specific values from the Movement for Black Lives, see the Black Lives Matter guiding principles available at <http://blacklivesmatter.com> and the Movement for Black Lives policy platform posted at <https://policy.m4bl.org>.

In April, Princess Beverly stepped into a new role as an advocate for systems change. She went to the state capitol in Sacramento for the Survivors Speak Conference.²⁸ She spoke about how the legal system failed her and how the adversarial court process kept her distant by telling her not to talk about the crime. Taking leadership in this way brought her a new sense of meaning; she was now giving back, regaining her voice and the power she lost when her son died.

Jovida: This is a beautiful story of someone who has been directly impacted by injustice who ends up leading both at the community level as a co-facilitator and at the systemic level as an advocate. Systems change is most powerful when the people who are negatively impacted by a system have a leadership role in reshaping it. There is a huge potential for people who have been impacted by the legal system to change the nature of that system entirely, which is what Legal Services for Prisoners with Children,²⁹ the Ella Baker Center, and others, are organizing to do.

Reflection: We invite readers to consider how we can restore a just balance of power. *How can restorative justice practitioners prioritize, support, and genuinely celebrate leadership from those most impacted by both structural and personal violence and harm, in a way that restores and heals everyone involved? Since people of color, trans, and queer people are actively targeted for punishment by the criminal legal system, how could we better support their leadership in this work, including our financial practices?*

²⁸ Survivors Speak is produced by Californians for Safety and Justice. The annual conference is held during National Crime Victim's Rights Week, to connect survivors of crime, honor loved ones, and advocate for smart justice policies. Learn more at www.safeandjust.org.

²⁹ To learn about Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, see www.prisonerswithchildren.org.

Grounding Our Work in People, Community, and History

Rose: Princess Beverly is an inspiring leader. She, Aunti Frances, and Malachi Scott lead our community actions. After violence occurs in the neighborhood, we have peace and justice walks to acknowledge the violence and reclaim space for community. On these walks Princess Beverly is often on the bullhorn, leading chants like, "*Ain't no power like the power of the people, 'cause the power of the people don't stop. Say What?*" We draw on chants that are relevant to the people in the neighborhood, like chants from the Black Power movement, since the Black Panthers started in North Oakland.³⁰

Jovida: That story illustrates another characteristic of social justice movements, which is that they are about people and relationships, grounded in community and history. When a movement helps us feel deeply connected to each other, and to a sense of existing within the arc of history, we gain a sense of our collective power. A recent example of this is the Water Protectors at Standing Rock. Their sense of community, culture, and history informed both their assertion of sovereignty and the way they established the camp as sacred ceremony space.³¹ When you draw on the history of the people in North Oakland, you are also applying this movement-building principle.

³⁰ Kreitner, Richard. "October 15, 1966: The Black Panther Party Is Founded." *The Nation*, October 2015. Available: <https://www.thenation.com/article/october-15-1966-the-black-panther-party-is-founded>.

³¹ For more about the story of Standing Rock Water Protectors' choice to practice ceremony, watch Judith LeBlanc in the recording of the 12/21/16 *Love In a Time of Violence* video conference, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnsZtyZpOOE>.

Rose: We value our history, elders, and ancestral traditions. In North Oakland, we are fortunate to be the home to many elders from the Black Panther movement. In our community trainings we say at least fifty percent of regular circles should be about relationship building. We enjoy "cooking circles" where we cook to create community and to serve ancestral food to neighbors at block parties. Cooking together is an opportunity to create a space for casual but intentional cross-generational learning, which builds relationships based on mutuality and reciprocity.

In August of 2015, we had a gumbo fest and block party to remember the anniversary of the murder of Lorenzo Ward, Princess Beverly's son. Several of us from NORJC met in the kitchen of Causa Justa::Just Cause, a grassroots power base-building organization.³² Making gumbo is a metaphor for mixing things up. We had some master gumbo makers and elders from the neighborhood, like Aunti Frances, Mr. G, and Miss Gerthina. Aunti Frances was part of the Black Panthers' program that provided healthy breakfasts each morning for school kids.³³ As we cooked, the young people connected with history through cutting the okra and vegetables while children ran around, laughing. About midway through, Mr. G. asked us to circle up. Miss Gerthina sprinkled the sacred herbs of gumbo filé on the stew while she called in the ancestors and prayed for the departed Lorenzo and for his mother, Princess Beverly. These rituals create relationships and connect us on many levels.

The next day at the block party, the youth from Urban Peace Movement,³⁴ a youth-organizing group, paid exquisite attention as Princess Beverly shared the story of losing

³² Learn more about Causa Justa::Just Cause at <https://cjjc.org>.

³³ Learn more about the Black Panther Party's free breakfast program in "The Black Panther Party and the Free Breakfast for Children Program" by Darryl Robertson, published online by The African American Intellectual History Society, February 26, 2016, at <http://www.aaihs.org/the-black-panther-party>.

³⁴ Learn more about Urban Peace Movement at www.urbanpeacemovement.org.

her son to gun violence. They used Playback Theatre from Theatre of the Oppressed³⁵ to practice the Zulu acknowledgement, *sawubona*, "*We see you.*"³⁶ It was a deep conversation. In return, Princess Beverly sang a Gospel song and invited us to join in with her.

Reflection: We invite readers to consider: *Who are the people and what are the community histories that a restorative justice movement is (or should be) most accountable to? How can we prioritize and take guidance and leadership from those relationships?*

In addition, because there is much to learn from cultures that have been practicing restorative responses to harm for thousands of years -- including many Native American tribes, and cultures all over the world who have developed and kept these practices alive -- we invite this reflection: *How can we honor cultural traditions that are not our own, in a respectful way, that does not appropriate or commodify them?*

Cultivating a Movement Ecosystem

Jovida: This kind of collaboration is a beautiful expression of community resilience. At MSC, we think about social justice movements as ecosystems. Biologists describe an ecosystem as a system of living organisms in an area that function together as a unit.³⁷ Like ecosystems, movements involve a diverse community of people, organizations, networks, and alliances interacting within a specific context (which might be a place, or a particular concern, like

³⁵ Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.

³⁶ Bishop, Orland. *Sawubona*. Online video clip, posted on YouTube by the Global Oneness Project Feb 8, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IjUkVZRPk8>.

³⁷ Ecosystem definition from Biology Online, available at www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Ecosystem.

workers' rights). Healthy ecosystems are interdependent and resilient, and have a diverse web of relationships. The same could be said of movements. When the NORJC collaborates with Phat Beets, Causa Justa::Just Cause, and Urban Peace Movement, each organization is playing a dynamic role in cultivating community resilience and supporting community members to experience the power they hold.

Rose: Right! Plus it's fun, and collaborating clarifies our unique contributions. Another example is the way that NORJC partners with Phat Beets in their kitchen incubator program. In this collaboration, we focus on restorative economics through jobs for women and girls who have experienced violence. We follow the Homeboy Industries model, "Nothing stops a bullet like a job."³⁸ The way to create a safe community is not through police and prisons: it is through creating local, meaningful economies, and healthy relationships. Restorative economics is about collectively building community-based economies to meet the needs of people who have been most harmed by the capitalism of mass incarceration. It is also about survivors of crime getting their economic needs met. It allows us to provide for our families, and ourselves, in a dignified way. Collaboration helps us to do this well; having diverse perspectives sparks a variety of creative ideas we might not come up with on our own. We also appreciate that the Akonadi Foundation follows an ecosystem grantmaking approach; we all get funding from Akonadi and it helps with these collaborations.³⁹

³⁸ For more about Homeboy Industries' model, see "Nothing stops a bullet like a job" by Duncan Campbell for *The Guardian USA edition*, first published Tuesday 23 November 1999 and available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/nov/24/usgunviolence.usa>.

³⁹ For more on the Akonadi approach, see *Ecosystem Grantmaking A Systemic Approach to Supporting Movement Building*, available at www.akonadi.org.

Reflection: We invite readers to consider if restorative justice is part of a larger social justice movement. *What are the interconnected relationships contributing towards a hopeful future that restorative justice is a part of? Who are the diverse partners we can join with to build that future?*

Building a Bigger We

Jovida: When you cultivate this kind of vibrant movement ecosystem, you are *Building a Bigger We*. Movements are powerful because they can solve problems bigger than one person or organization can address alone. Movements connect a wide range of people who have different experiences, perspectives, and contributions to work towards a common vision or values. This can also mean that we work with people whom we may not fully understand or agree with completely, but with whom we share common purpose.

One of my favorite examples of *Building a Bigger We* is the Strong Families Initiative. It started when Forward Together convened a network of reproductive justice organizations.⁴⁰ The group realized that the policies they all opposed reflected an outdated idea of family. The people in the network all felt deeply committed to their families which did not reflect the fantasy of a mom at home and a dad at work. They launched the Strong Families Initiative as “a home for the 4 out of 5 people living in the US who do not live behind the picket fence.”⁴¹ The Initiative connects diverse organizations to collaborate towards a vision that every family has the rights,

⁴⁰ Learn more about Forward Together at <http://forwardtogether.org>.

⁴¹ <http://strongfamiliesmovement.org/what-we-do>, accessed 5/15/2017.

recognition, and resources it needs to thrive. The network includes efforts focused on racial justice, youth, immigration, LGBT communities, criminal justice reform, and economic justice.

Rose: That makes me think about an experience I had with the San Quentin Restorative Justice Interfaith Roundtable a few years ago. San Quentin, which is a men’s prison, is one of the nine California prisons that has been designated to incarcerate transgender people. As the Roundtable grew to 200, more and more transgender women joined. We began to see some "othering" rather than “belonging” within the circles. Inclusivity is one of our values, so we held a daylong symposium on violence against transgender people. We had two guest speakers who identified as transgender share stories with the group.

Tanesh Nutall was one of our guest speakers. She told us stories about a lifetime of hatred and violence she experienced as a transgender person. The stigma caused her to use drugs and alcohol to numb the pain. She told us, “If you don’t agree with another person’s beliefs, learn to love them anyway. If you spend time with individuals you may not like, your thoughts will change. You will come to see the person’s spirit.”⁴² Through sharing our personal stories and listening to others with open hearts, we’re learning a new way of relating in community. As a group we embraced our varying levels of discomfort. We began to see each other’s humanity. I saw people who held closed views about transgender people open up after hearing Tanesh’s story. Sitting in weekly restorative circles with diverse people calls us to move beyond biased belief systems. We are consciously choosing and working together to *build a bigger We*.

⁴² Tanesh Nutall spoke to the San Quentin Interfaith Restorative Justice Roundtable on Nov. 21, 2015.

Reflection: We invite readers to consider: *How can we grow a bigger We that can create the world we envision? Would it change what we focus on or how we go about our work?*

Living in the Future We Want

Jovida: Wow. Because of the work I used to do with Community United Against Violence, I have heard horror stories of the incredible violence transgender women face in men's prisons. I am so glad to hear a story of healing! It is a great example of another strength restorative practices can offer movement-builders: we have to be willing to *walk our talk*. As Brazilian educator/activist Paulo Freire liked to say, "We make the road by walking."⁴³ When we live our values and consciously cultivate these qualities through regular practice, we generate and experience the world we want. I see this happening within restorative processes, and I'm curious how much you think it is happening outside the formal boundaries of these processes?

Rose: I can give an example of that happening organically. We didn't start out with a diverse group of 200 incarcerated people attending the San Quentin RJ Interfaith Roundtable each week. In 2005, it started with a handful of incarcerated people who initiated a study group to learn about restorative justice. We had a regular group of 30 or so for around four years. One day we were doing an exercise about our shared values, and one of the men brought up how we needed to embody restorative justice values and principles in our everyday life. We discussed if how if we react with violence when someone hurts us or cuts in front of us in the chow line, even in our

⁴³ For example, the published conversation between Myles Horton, Paulo Freire with this title: *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Temple University Press. 1990.

thoughts, then we are not making restorative justice a way of life. We also explored how we could live as though we are all connected. The indigenous belief that violence happens when we forget we are all connected informs the practice of restorative justice.

Exploring how to live out our values caused a profound shift, and the group really started growing. One man suggested that we reach out to incarcerated people who were different than us and invite them to join the Roundtable. We invited men from ethnic groups that were not already participating, including Polynesians and Filipinos. We made the space welcoming for younger inmates who often do not go to programming. We didn't want to tokenize them, so we also included them in the leadership. There was already an informal restorative justice group for Spanish speakers, and we formalized one with intention. In a few months we doubled in size to 75 regulars. As we started addressing intersectional topics like race and restorative justice, or sex trafficking and restorative justice, our group grew to 200. By asking ourselves how we could go deeper, we decided as a group to embody the values we longed for. We used self-reflection, paying attention and observing our actions in order to learn about ourselves. We also decided that through a contemplative practice, we could create space for this learning and transformation. It was hard work to shift our attitudes and actions, but in small, doable steps, we started becoming the change we want to see in the world.

Reflection: We invite readers to reflect on what we could *do* differently (or how we could *be* different) to grow a movement that reflects our vision. *What are the values that are central to our work, and how could we better practice those values in our everyday interactions? What*

ways of being do we need to embody to create meaningful change that is aligned with our vision?

Conclusion

Travelling through the prison corridor in California's Central Valley invites reflection on *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel expresses the pain of many types of injustice, and a yearning to trample out our society's vintage of wrath and punishment.⁴⁴ In the book, the main character, Tom, starts out on the road after leaving prison. By the end, he comes to a new understanding: “A fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but only a piece of a big one.”⁴⁵ Through Steinbeck's storytelling, readers get lessons of a bigger We. It is a book of liberation.

We feel this humble essay is a cry for justice, and it offers a vision, too. We anticipate it will spur conversations. Perhaps this essay will spark openings for people who have lived experiences of systemic and structural harms to lead out, with vision and purpose, and to collaboratively create the world we want. We truly desire that people impacted by injustice can be supported as leaders of restorative justice organizations and of this movement. Embodying the connections between personal transformation and political transformation means that we practice restorative justice as a way of life, knowing that we are connected to everyone and everything. We invite you on this journey. By incorporating movement-building principles into restorative practices, we can “make the road by walking.” Together our ecosystem of actions will honor our past as we create the future and build the bigger We.

⁴⁴ The title *The Grapes of Wrath* refers to lyrics from the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, by Julia Ward Howe (emphasis added): Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord / He is *trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored* / He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword / His truth is marching on.

⁴⁵ Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Octopus Books Inc. 1984, p. 292.