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Personal and Systemic Transformation

The kind of change we are after is cellular as well as institutional, is personal and intimate, is collective as well as cultural. We are making love synonymous with justice.

—PRENTIS HEMPHILL

Healing trauma, making ourselves more whole again, and changing society and the economy are distinct yet interdependent processes. They can work powerfully for and toward each other, or they can be at odds.

I think many of us in this generation of social justice and healing are asking the question of how personal and systemic transformation can powerfully serve one another. How can we best reveal the need for each, in coordination with the other, toward the world we desire? This is not a new inquiry, or even a new integration; it's just new for our moment and context. I think many of us are exploring and experimenting with how personal and systemic transformation can become not only integrated and co-serving, but inseparable. How both can be fully engaged, each energizing the other, each making the other more effective.

I believe we need to engage both personal and systemic transformation, for the liberatory future we imagine and need.

Let's look at the processes of systemic change first.

Social Change Takes Structural Change

Social change is not just a change of many individual attitudes. In some ways, that may be the easiest part of social change. Many people's attitudes about racism or climate change have shifted, even in the last decade, but the systems driving white supremacy and climate destruction have not. In fact, they have intensified within the United States under the current administration.

Social change means transforming the economic and governing structures we live and operate within. It means transforming from a power-over worldview, to a power-with paradigm—one that assumes interdependence and equity with all life. It means that economy shifts radically from exploiting the earth's biosphere and the majority of people, to one based in equity and a renewable and interdependent relationship with the living systems that allow for life—ours included. At this point, if we don't, we are facing dire consequences within the next 75–150 years.

Just Transition is a framework for a fair shift to an economy that is ecologically sustainable, equitable and just for all its members. After centuries of global plunder, the profit-driven, growth-dependent, industrial economy is severely undermining the life support systems of the planet. An economy based on extracting from a finite system faster than the capacity of the system to regenerate will eventually come to an end—either through collapse or through our intentional re-organization. Transition is inevitable. Justice is not.

(MOVEMENT GENERATION, *From Banks and Tanks to Cooperation and Caring: A Strategic Framework for a Just Transition*)

Systemic change focuses on shifting power—the ability to define and decide on reality and resources—from being concentrated with the

few most privileged, to those most affected by the power-over system and to the collective. Systemic change works to radically change the economics of global capital—where it comes from and whom it goes to. Systemic change transforms the systems that promote an amassing economy and power-over conditions like mass incarceration and for-profit prisons, food systems based on monocropping and chemicals, into a just and restorative economic system. This is no small task. But, it's necessary for life on the planet to continue and thrive.

The means to change systems are varied and unique. History shows that it takes community-based organizing and mass movements to create systemic change. In mass movements, millions of people are engaged in changing the worldview, the governing structures, and the economy. It takes campaigns to change policy and governing structures. It takes all of these to change who governs and how we govern. Systems change requires disrupting the status quo and building alternatives.

Those who have been doing this work for decades are our best guides. People have devoted their lives to becoming excellent organizers, community leaders, political educators, and social change strategists. They are thinking locally, nationally, and internationally. For those of us who have not spent the majority of our time doing this, or built our competence, we can join and support those who have.

Some of the things organizers are focused on doing are:

- Mobilizing and organizing people in their communities or workplaces
- Developing and implementing local and national strategy
- Building and running campaigns to change policy, resources, and practice
- Affecting electoral politics—running candidates, influencing who governs
- Policy change, and implementation and enforcement
- Building alternatives: food, transportation, local economies, restorative and transformative justice

- Political education
- New worldviews and communications, changing hearts and minds
- Preparing communities and leaders to govern
- Organizing dissent and resistance to oppressive policies, violence, and conditions

Our current social and economic conditions shape millions of people into the power-over worldview, practices, and embodied survival strategies. Even if many, many individuals grow and change, that does not directly translate into a change in the economy or governing structures or the military. Nor does it translate into a radical mainstream shift of worldview from individualism, amassing wealth, disconnection from the planet, or supremacy. Malls are being built, forests cut down, and success is being defined by capital, even as mindfulness spreads in the West.

Structural change alters the systems in which we live so that millions of people can be shaped by equity, interdependence with the biosphere, and cooperation. Humans have a wide range of potential—from incredibly empathetic, cooperative, and creative to demeaning, awful, and violent. What gets cultivated in us has a lot to do with the social and economic conditions we reside within. To me it's more social than personal.

What are we moving and organizing toward? Many brilliant people are exploring this question and working on both disrupting the status quo and building the new.

- From global capitalism based on concentrating wealth and exploiting resources and people, to local and sustainable economies and fair labor.
- Collective ownership of the commons: water, air, lands, etc.
- Changing the cultural narrative and paradigm from power-over to power-with, including the safety, belonging, and dignity of all peoples. The narrative shifts from accumulation and

exploitation, to sustaining and interdependence, and from suffering as virtuous to happiness as virtuous.

- Collective practices aligned with cooperation, democratic processes.
- Generative conflict, empathy, wisdom, and collective well-being.
- Right-sizing humans in relationship to the earth's regenerative natural systems.
- Self-governance.
- Healing and addressing historical traumas, reparations.
- Transforming ourselves from the impact and embodiment of power-over conditions, violence, intimate violence, and other harms.
- Using restorative and transformative justice to address harm, safety, and accountability.
- And more....

Again, Movement Generation has done a beautiful job at articulating a shift in conditions; they call it a change from an Extractive Economy to a Regenerative Economy. You can find their framework at <https://movementgeneration.org/justransition>.

It's Possible

Systems change can be confusing for many, and overwhelming for most. I think the ahistorical and individualistic nature of US culture is part of this confusion. We are generally taught to be forward-looking, and not to pay attention to the broad patterns of history—even as we are deeply affected by these patterns. These patterns tell us about small groups of people concentrating power and wealth, of how enemies are built and wars justified, and how patriotism is redefined depending on the power elite of the decade. History, if we look, also tells us about why white supremacy is such a powerful ongoing struggle in this

country, why patriarchy is still the norm, and why we think ownership of the commons—land, air, and water, is even possible. History helps us understand our moment, and see a different future.

Individualism, in connection with this, tends to keep our attention on our own—either that I'm taking care of my own and the “other” is not my responsibility, or I made it (or didn't) because of my own singular efforts and others should do the same. This keeps our attention on our own lives and maybe those near to us by family or community or region. This is the ungrounded myth of “pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps” with hard work alone.

Capitalism, tied to individualism and a lack of history, also makes systems change confusing. Buy it, own it, and accumulate become the signs of success, and even the offered markers of safety, belonging, and dignity. Of course, accumulation has little to do with any of these. Having access to good housing, healthy food, health care, education, meaningful work, and community has lots to do with them, however, as do equity and clean water. Capitalism has us put our attention and time into accumulating, being successful, and “safe” in those terms, and meanwhile undermining our real security—the health of the planet, meaningful community, and knowing how to have generative conflict and interdependence with each other and the rest of life.

Finally, when I talk with people who generally have shared values, care about others and the planet, systems change can still seem overwhelming and feel so big. I get it. It is. I hear many people say something like “I care, I vote, I try to buy (organic, local, fair trade, etc.), I recycle ... I don't know what else to do.” We can think of voting every two or four years as being our only way to affect policy, governing, or the economy. Or we can assume that changing our own individual attitudes is what we can do. These are both important, but not enough to change systems. I hear others say, “Why get involved at all? It doesn't make a difference.” This too is understandable, especially if one's experience shows them that. However, people organizing in their communities,

regions, states, and countries has such a long proven history of success in creating change.

I think mostly we have not been taught what to do to be a part of systemic change. Finding the road there is not always easy, but it's possible. Here are some ways:

- Join organizations and alliances that are focused on equity, changing the economy, and environmental justice. Most of these organizations use organizing and base building as a main means toward equity and sustainability. "Join" means go to meetings, volunteer your time, bring your resources, money, and otherwise, to serve the purpose of the organization, and more.
- Continue to educate yourself about our conditions and how we are and can change them toward equity and sustainability. You can do this through self-study, political education, and joining groups doing the same. You can learn, deepen understanding of your own social location, and how you show up well and most powerfully for change.
- How deeply can you get your life, money, resources, and time aligned with the values of equity and environmental justice? If you have more than you need, ask yourself the question, how much do you really need? What do others need? What does the future need? Have this conversation with someone who does social change work. And, act accordingly.
- In the places where you live and work, join others to shift and equalize power: who decides and who has and controls resources? How can your organization serve equity and environmental justice? You can organize with others to change policy and practice. Assess, is your organization working toward something else, instead? If so, what does it consider success? Who benefits and who pays?
- Support and help build alternatives. This can be alternative local food systems, this can be restorative and transformative justice,

this can be renewable energy and non-fossil fuel-based transportation, etc.

- Lastly, you can participate in dissent. This can be online, in the streets, in your neighborhood, and more. Let yourself be counted based on what you value, based on the community and world that works for the whole, not the few.

None of this is that easy or comfortable, because of the conditions we live in. This can feel like swimming upstream and in some ways, it is, when we are changing systems. Yet, our actions, where we place our love, time, and resources, are what we help build. For ourselves, for others, and for the future. What do you want to help build?

Sites of Shaping/Sites of Change: Transformation. In chapter 2, and throughout the book, we have explored how we are shaped at each and every Site—from the personal to the institutional and historical. We are shaped by, hurt and/or privileged by, and somatically adapt to power-over social conditions through the Sites. This is embodied in us even when we don't agree with the values or structures of these systems.

The great news is that we can also shape and affect these Sites toward what's more life-affirming, toward change. Below are examples of ways we can work to transform at various Sites. As we discussed, the larger the Site, the more people it impacts and the more people it takes to change the systems and norms of that Site. The change is then sustained by new systems, by a shift in worldview, and by new collective practices.

Each Site requires a different means of change. One means of change cannot be easily imported to another. I have heard therapists say, "If everyone just did their healing work, the world would be different." But this doesn't map over like that. The systems operating at the scale of global economy or a two-party democracy don't change just by individuals changing. I have also heard social change organizers dismiss healing as "soft skills" and unnecessary, saying if we can just change oppressive policies and/or shift who's in power, people's lives

will change. While I appreciate this view, I also think it is not a one-to-one match. Trauma, sexual assault, and the impact of intergenerational oppression need particular attention and healing.

The means of change, as well as the skills and experiences needed to create change, at each Site are different. The scale of operation at each Site is different. Creating purposeful change at the various Sites can, however, complement one another, if done within a broader vision and purpose for the change, and with a shared understanding of power. Transformation and trauma healing for individuals and families can support and serve institutional change and vice versa. They can make each other stronger, and more lasting.

Individual: We can heal traumas, we can become more powerful and loving, we can choose more than we react, with purposeful, intentional healing and practice. How do we change and grow as people? Biologists, acupuncturists, psychologists, and medicine people would all have different answers to this. Somatics sees that we, as people, can change through intentional transformative work and embodied practice, over time. Most often, this is guided and supported by someone with more experience and competency in the areas we are committed to transforming or healing.

Family and Intimate Networks: As we discussed in chapter 2, to change family culture and practice, to change intergenerational family trauma, we can engage family systems therapy, ceremony, new facilitated conversations and/or new collective somatic practices. Bringing more information and resources into the family system is usually a part of these processes. Healing intergenerational wounds; finding new ways of addressing conflict, accountability, apologies, and amends can have a huge impact on an intimate network and family system, culture, and practices.

Community: Community usually changes purposefully through community organizing. The aims of the organizing are defined by the community, and those people (and lands) most impacted by power-over systems. This is important because the perspective and experiences

from this position are unique, and usually bring with them a broader view. Community organizing might shift local policies and practices, may increase resources and access to good food, education, art, and outdoor space. It may organize and educate a community toward equity and environmental sustainability. Communities can also practice alternative local economic alternatives and transformative justice. Bringing more information and resources into the community is usually a part of these processes.

Institutions: We change institutions purposefully through organizing, campaigns, movement building, communications (changing hearts and minds), building alternatives to scale, dissent, and more. These then affect electoral politics, governing and financial institutions, and academia (what gets held as history, reality, researched, and studied). The fundamental economic, governing, energy, and business systems need to be shifted to equity and environmental sustainability to create power-with conditions.

Social Norms and Historical Forces: Social norms are shifted as institutions are. Historical forces are ours to learn from and then address their collective shaping. Specific processes like reparations can address historical traumas and current systems of oppression.

Landscape and Spirit: Again, in this model, we hold that landscape and Spirit mostly shape us. Of course, we impact land and other elements deeply. The changes at the other Sites help us shift how we are treating and relating to land, water, air, forests, and more. We can restore land, water, and air by massive cleanup and restoration efforts, and by drastically shifting our use of fossil fuels, toxins, and extraction of minerals, etc.

We want to know the differences in how people, communities, and systems are changed, so that we can work with each effectively. This also helps us to better integrate personal, community, and systemic transformation—and again have these processes serve each other.

Healing trauma, making ourselves more whole, and changing society and the economy are most effective, most transformative, when

done interdependently. We need to engage both personal and systemic transformation for the liberatory future we imagine and need.

Healing Can Serve Social Change

As we see, social and economic change takes people, leaders, organizers, cultural workers, strategists, and ... more people. It takes people who are able to coordinate with each other, take courageous action together, and build toward an interdependent vision and purpose. It means we need to be able to invite and tolerate change based in liberatory and life-affirming values. Even when it gets hard. How do we be these people? How can healing serve all of this?

We are shaped by life, by our experiences, both positive and traumatic. Because of our safety strategies and power-over conditions most of us need to heal and transform to be able to live our values. We can heal and transform to be more whole, to hurt less and love more, to gain courage, and to have our values and actions become more and more aligned.

There are many, many things that trauma healing and embodied transformation can bring to our lives and communities, and to serve social and environmental justice.

- Embodied healing helps us become clearer in how we are seeing and assessing ourselves, others, and the situation at hand. It can also help us become clearer at assessing opportunities and challenges within social justice work.
- Healing widens our range of skills, from having clear yet dignifying boundaries, to being able to connect and hold our own and others' needs. These skills serve our relationships and build trust.
- Trauma healing allows us to develop presence, and the ability to be present with a wide range of people, emotions, and situations. We become less reactive, more responsive, and more connected

to what we care about. Each of these capacities serves our lives, leadership, and our organizing for systemic change.

- Embodied practice helps us learn to hold and be creative with the inevitable contradictions we face. Contradictions are present in our social justice organizations, in healing and trauma work, within alternative models like transformative justice, and even within our experiments to combine healing and movement building. We need to be able to work with them well, and create possibilities rather than more breakdowns.
- Trauma healing and embodied practice let us engage in generative conflict. This can prevent splitting and group reactivity, and lead instead to more trust, holding more complexity, and leading more effectively together. Through healing we don't throw each other or others away so quickly. Instead, we learn to build each other up.
- Embodied healing can help us learn to be powerful and relevant allies. We can engage the deeper work of unpacking privilege and changing our reactions. We can also learn to "let in" allyship, extending trust instead of skepticism.
- Lastly, trauma healing supports us in being able to love and be loved better. We can mend and be happier, while we are navigating a complex world in which we choose to live and act from our values.

How We Change

Somatics is fascinated with the *HOW*, more than why. *How* are we shaped, how do we cultivate resilience, how do we practice, how do we transform? This makes somatics both pragmatic and deep. Somatics gives us a practical and applicable understanding of *how* we embody what we do, and *how* we can change.

A politicized somatics invites us to ask different questions: How can we build resilience into our campaigns? How has this community been



traumatized, and how has that shaped them? How can our organizing approach be particular to this shaping and support healing? What do we want to practice together to build more connection and coherence? What embodied skills do we need to have our actions better aligned with our stated mission? How can we do conflict well? A deeper understanding of how people heal and transform helps us know how to more effectively engage people in change.

In understanding more about how we are shaped, how we survive, and how we heal, we can more powerfully connect with people. We can become more whole and engaged people and help others do the same. We can engage change that responds to safety, belonging, and dignity, personally and in service of an equitable and ecologically sustainable future for all life.

→ *Self-Direction*