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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Building an
intergenerational
progressive movement
Separate oil and state
Education, activism and
community building



CRITICAL MASS

A primer for social change





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You can't teach breakfast.

royalty-free photo courtesy Emiliano Spada

Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation of Hamilton-Wentworth





Work in Progress

BY ERIKA SHAKER

After 20+ years working in and with social justice organizations in various different capacities, it suddenly occurred to me that I was no longer able to claim to be part of or represent the “younger generation.” And after I recovered from the shock, I began to think about what happens next.

What do progressive people do when they realize that there are victories we can no longer take for granted, particularly when we see some of those hard-fought victories being eroded? What do we do when we find ourselves having oh-so-familiar arguments in defense of the basic tenants of a just society... but this time with people much younger rather than the grey-haired monied set we used to butt heads with? What do

we do when we realize that what we’re doing now — what we did in the past — to secure victories and move a progressive agenda forward may no longer be enough (if it ever was)?

Periodically I hear criticism from some of the established progressive community about how today’s young activists have an unwarranted sense of entitlement (see, for example, some of the debates raging in feminism). But it makes me wonder: after all the struggles of the past, and with all the struggles of today, isn’t entitlement precisely the point? Isn’t the reason we continue to toil for a better world and a better future precisely so our children will be *entitled* to a more just, more equitable, fairer world than the one we inherited?

Isn't that what progress is about?

I'm not arguing that we should forget the sacrifices that were made — the backbreaking mental and physical labour, the toll taken on families and personal relationships, the weeks spent on picket lines, the incarcerations, the deaths — but I don't see how we can justify our claim that we're making these sacrifices so that our children *won't have to worry* about equality or racism or child

We need to learn about what's been won, and what's been lost.

care or pharmacare or safe workplaces or a living wage or clean drinking water or student debt or a million other things....and then complain that they *don't worry* about them. We *want* them to feel entitled to all these human rights; rights are things we should *all* be entitled to — rather than, say, optional perks like granite countertops or ipads.

That said, we also need to do a much better job at telling our stories and making the struggles that have brought us to where we are today an integral part of our social fabric. We — all of us, and especially our youngest — need to learn about what's been won, and what's been lost. We need to develop a network of support that provides our struggles with historical context as well as one that allows us to build on and learn from each other's work in the

present and ultimately the future. And we need to figure out ways to do that — to work *with* our debates and our differences and our conflicts and our debates, not let them tear us apart. Because I think that those differences will make our movement(s) stronger, more responsive, more inclusive and, ultimately, more resilient in the face of neoliberal oppression and opposition. And on these things I think we need to do much better.

The theme of this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* — “Critical Mass: A primer for social change” coalesced — as many of the themes of this journal do — over time, and as a result of a number of conversations that culminated in a call for a discussion that addresses this particular point in our social justice evolution. And it tries to get at a few key questions: given social media, generational shifts, identity politics, financial challenges and an increasingly organized and well-funded conservative opposition, do we need to change how we “do” activism? Who are our teachers now — and who will they be in the next few decades? What can we learn from those breaking new ground? And how do we build a movement that will continue to further our social justice goals, ensuring our continued progress towards a more just and equitable society for all of us?

Ashley Burczak tackles some of these questions in a very thoughtful, compassionate way

— a way that provides an informal frame for much of this issue of *OS/OS*. She identifies the difficulty many progressives have in building a sense of community and a network of support to resist (better funded and better organized) anti-oppression agendas.

[M]ovements can only be effective if they grow. That growth happens in two ways — by further involving the people who already agree with you, and by convincing new people of your perspective. In the case of the first group, the effort required to build a confident, effective new leader is fairly straightforward. However, it requires time, persistence, open confrontation of oppressive dynamics within your movement, and a willingness to give up some credit, along with some control over the shape of your work — efforts too many of us are unwilling to make.

In the case of the second group, the hard truth is that we only have two options: we can destroy our oppressors, or we can transform them. Even if the first option were possible — and I don't believe it really is — I would rather be oppressed myself than spend my days trying to destroy people.

Kevin Millsip's contribution is directly connected to Ashley's call for comprehensive mentorship. Next Up is a BC-based project designed to provide mentorship in social justice work to young people:

In general, the field of progressive social change work does not have an integrated approach to both welcoming and grounding young people. There is a particular disconnect between theory, skills development, mentorship and action, and reflection opportunities....This is when Next Up was created, with the goal of to putting into practice the understanding that in order to have more leaders, we need to invest in leadership development.

Tim McCaskell examines the steps involved in building an effective social movement with the intent of bringing about positive social change — in this case, a multi-faceted campaign targeting the criminalization of individuals with HIV-AIDS. He lays out the required steps including popular education, media work and mobilization — vital not just for this campaign but for others as well. In addition to providing a thoughtful and salient analysis of how to build social movements, his article outlines a case study in effective public campaigning as well.

The role of popular education in successful community campaigns is further developed in other articles in this issue of *OS/OS*. Ryan McGreal and Jenaaleinee Davarajah and Valerie Stam provide potentially new templates (and lessons learned) addressing issues of community involvement, public empowerment, and engagement with the political process at the local level. McGreal explores a grassroots municipal campaign focused on issues of inner-city development and public financing, and provides readers with key strategies that proved to be quite successful in the face of a very well-funded and politically-connected opposition. Davarajah and Stam describe the Ottawa-based City for All Women Initiative (CAWI):

Learning goes well beyond the classroom setting; realizing this, the women of CAWI have made it their goal to educate and encourage women from diverse backgrounds to become more involved within their community and city. Using the foundations of popular education, CAWI provides women with the appropriate knowledge and skill sets to actively challenge and influence city politics. By doing so, the organization has created a space where women, especially those from marginalized commu-

nities, can collectively identify with the inequalities they face within the city. Through their collective efforts, the women of CAWI are able to challenge the neoliberal structuring within urban centres that often polarize such groups, both socially and spatially.

Shellie Bird, a long-time activist, describes how she used the Alternative Federal Budget (AFB) as an entry point to examine the relationship between theory and practice. Interestingly, she was able to address some of her own misreadings of the reasons for the gap between policy and grassroots mobilization:

the work...is much more nuanced than I had thought. I came to understand that it is often constrained not so much by political or ideological differences but by the very practical realities of limited time, resources and over-stretched organizations.

But what also became clear to her was the need for consistent and rigorous review of what organizations are doing to ensure they continue to move towards their goals:

the more people's organizations take time

for non-judgmental but rigorous review of their established norms, practices and the assumptions about how to carry out the work. the better their chances of creating the necessary social change needed to win the progressive policies they advance!

Community activism and education come together in other articles in this issue: Tam Goossen describes her experience as a Toronto school trustee in a diverse community where the relationship between the community and the school was paramount. She maintains that, 10 years after amalgamation, we need to reinvent our neighbourhoods with the public school at the centre, because:

I would much rather my granddaughter attended a school with a heart than a school that emphasizes only the academic aspect of learning. It is my wish that her school will try its best to welcome and include all students and their families. It is my wish that her school will work with the larger community to make sure its most vulnerable students and their families get the necessary help to improve their quality of life and access to a good education.

It is my wish that my granddaughter will have friends not just at the school, but also at after-school activity programs at the community centre, and that as she gets older, she will join a youth group co-organized by the school and the community centre, and that, in time, she will be a mentor to other youth. And the circle will turn.

As Tam explains, because of its unique relationship with the surrounding community, the school is often the most appropriate and effective place to work for positive social change: this is the subject of a number of *OS/OS* articles. Spencer Harrison describes his role as artist-in-residence at Georges-Vanier Secondary School in Toronto as providing a safe space to confront gender oppression and homophobia, and the way in which art is used to do this. Sarah Bryant examines sex education as a way to engage kids in what and how they learn about a topic with powerful and personal ramifications. Bill Bigelow from *Rethinking Schools* talks about his curriculum based on a people's history of the abolition. He explains:

I wanted students to see that history is a series of choice-points and there is nothing inevitable about the direction of society,

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that where things move depends on how we analyze the world and how we act on that analysis. People like them — not only famous leaders — make history.

Paul Orlowski deconstructs the de-politicized way in which environmental education is often taught, using his background in media criticism. He summarizes:

The goal of the critical educator is to ask an important question. The question I asked here was this: Why can't we do something to stop the serious threat to our natural

world caused by the oil industry? ... Perhaps if we are serious about dealing with climate change and other oil-related catastrophes, an informed public will elect people into office who are just as concerned about the fate of the planet as they are.

George Stephenson humorously questions the role that social media can play in recording political and social uprising — a new twist on the medium being the message. Can the revolution really be tweeted? “Even if those involved in momentous events manage to send out Twitter messages, they are given



Elly Adeland

status because of the method of delivery rather than their content. If someone left a phone message of 140 characters, the media wouldn't quote it endlessly." Finally, Elly Adeland of the Polaris Institute takes this analysis of research and political activism into the post-secondary context and examines the bottled-water-free campaigns taking place on campuses across the country. She describes some of the particularly effective campaign techniques that, combined with hard research, were instrumental in confronting the bottled-water industry and setting up an effective resistance.

It's no secret that the inherently political aspect of education and the role of educators has come under fire recently (Wisconsin comes to mind — see "Bottled Water In... School Teachers Out" in this issue). These implications are often international: Larry Kuehn provides an overview of CIDA's decision to cut funding to the Canadian Teachers' Federation's international programs. And where is CIDA's money now going?

Funding is being redirected into "Corporate Social Responsibility projects" of big mining companies such as Barrick Gold and Rio Tinto....So there you have it. The priorities of the current government are clear: no professional development for teachers in devel-

oping countries; instead, add to the profits of Canadian mining companies by providing government subsidies to their international investments.

Henry Giroux examines the role youth are playing in recent international demonstrations, and suggests reasons why this keen awareness and action is not being reflected in American counterparts.

European students live in societies where it becomes more difficult to collapse public life into largely private considerations. Students in these countries have access to a wider range of critical public spheres; politics in many of these countries has not collapsed entirely into the spectacle of celebrity/commodity culture; left-oriented political parties still exist; and labor unions have more political and ideological clout than they do in the United States.... American youth must "understand their rights and know how to demand them" and realize "their own power" just like their counterparts in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Serbia, and all those other countries coming out of the darkness, heralded by the right to freedom, justice and equality.

The theme of this issue is a fairly complex and multi-faceted one: obviously none of this is easy,

and these aren't minor discussion points. We're talking about constant re-examination of who we are and how we "do" social change, how we work and move forward together, how we heal wounds, and all within a global context where the money and the power structure often appears to be insurmountably one-sided. But the stakes are far too high to pretend that where we are is anywhere close to good enough. And we're at far too critical a point in

time to just leave this banner to be taken up by the "next" generation because, as Ashley Burczak explains, "if we don't find a way to do those things — to mentor new leaders, build community, and persuade those who disagree with us, we will lose. We'll leave the world worse. And to be honest, I'm not sure how much more the world can stand."

And debates on the left notwithstanding, on that I think we can all agree.

* * *

Erika Shaker is the Executive Editor of Our School/Our Selves.



ASHLEY BURCZAK

“It’s Not My Job to Educate You”

How anti-oppression activists are failing to build a movement

Recently, I was talking to a friend who has quite a bit of experience with the conservative movement in America, specifically with the activists within that movement who focus on building new conservative leadership. She’s writing her dissertation about their work, which has meant spending hours at libertarian conferences, anti-choice leadership trainings, and seminars for the Glenn Becks of tomorrow. How my friend has maintained her admirable sanity is an open question, but she has learned a great deal.

One thing she *has* learned has come very much a surprise to her: the mentorship, nurturing, and overall kindness — in other words, the sense of *community* — within the conservative movement far outweighs what she has found in years of feminist and other progressive activism. In the course of her research, she has received more help from people who *know she does not agree with them* than she ever has from the elders who are supposedly “on her side”. Ironically, she has found that some of the most rabid individualists — people who, for example, want to turn the provision of water into a corporate venture — are better at building connections and unity than we progressives are, even with all our lip service to the villages it takes to raise children.

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The second thing my friend has noticed in right-wing activists has been an impressive openness. Despite the rigidity of their ideology, these activists are willing to work with people who disagree with them: to engage them with the goal of eventually moving them toward a more conservative worldview. In contrast,

Anti-oppression activists are faced with the difficult task of convincing people that the basic models they live by need to be radically changed, without access to much in the way of institutional power or media voice.

when the young conservative activists she meets tell her about their encounters with progressives, they reliably describe our behavior as verging on outright cruelty. They are called names, say they are humiliated in class by professors who

supposedly abhor the use of authority to harm others, and generally forced out of any dialogue that might change their ideas.

I've been worrying a lot about these two observations, and trying to make sense of them because it's not hard to see that, if true, the implications for anti-oppression organizing are not good. If we are failing to build community among those who *do* agree with us AND shutting out anyone who doesn't already agree with us, there isn't much of anywhere for our "movement" to go.

There are several reasons the Right is so effective at ensuring the world is currently speeding toward dystopia like a steam train, many of which have nothing to do with our actions. A small group of rich corporate types regularly throws hundreds of millions of dollars toward financing mentorship of new right-wing activists, academics, "journalists," and media figures. We just don't have that kind of money. They also have another edge: it is also much easier to protect oppression than it is to oppose it. Anti-oppression activists are faced with the difficult task of convincing people that the basic models they live by need to be radically changed, without access to much in the way of institutional power or media voice. On the other hand, the narrative supporting oppression is already fully formed in the public mind, and it is reinforced daily: pretty much every commercial on TV is a commercial for white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Each time we begin a public discussion about creating an anti-

oppression narrative, we start from scratch. The basic fabric of our culture supports the work of activists working to maintain oppression, while working against alternative visions.

These are very real challenges which we do need to respond to in our organizing strategies. But there are also areas where anti-oppression activists create our own problems. Most notably, we're falling down on efforts at building new leadership, even when we do have access to resources.

In 2001 I, along with a group of other young activists, started Students Active For Ending Rape (SAFER), an organization devoted to providing college students in the U.S. with the training and mentorship they need to become effective anti-violence activists. The response from many established social justice funders was less than enthusiastic. While SAFER did manage to find funding and survive, the majority of our budget was raised through grassroots efforts, pieced together bit by bit. Unlike the organizations opposing us, who operate with large multi-year grants provided by a few funders and are therefore able to spend most of their energy on programmatic work, SAFER has been forced to focus a tremendous amount of energy on fundraising — a fact that has no doubt slowed the organization's efforts.

There are a variety of reasons for the funding disparity between SAFER and its opponents. As I've mentioned, right-wing causes have much greater access to institutional resources, especially corporate money. And, as is unfortunately common, we were dismissed by many funders due to our focus on so-called "women's issues" — considered unimportant by many male progressives. However, it was not merely sexism or corporate influence that limited our efforts. Quite simply, social justice organizers of the baby boom generation did not recognize the importance of building young leaders in the same way those on the Right do.

Before it was a national nonprofit organization, SAFER began as a grassroots effort by students at Columbia University to improve the school's sexual assault prevention and response policy. SAFER built a genuinely powerful grassroots movement from the ground up. We secured 1,800 signatures on a petition supporting our work, organized several protests involving hundreds of students, had a mailing list of over 150 students, and had an active leadership of dozens. Only about five students

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were actively involved in opposing our work; however, those five students found their voices greatly amplified by the support provided to them by a larger right-wing infrastructure. In contrast to our experience of spending weeks unsuccessfully searching for a single organization that could provide us with support or mentorship when we faced a blitz of media attacks coordinated by a national right-wing organization, the most involved student opposing SAFER's work was provided with a \$4,000 fellowship from the right-wing Phillips Foundation to write articles in the school paper. He was given the opportunity to network with multiple conservative organizations and leaders, even finding himself on a private yachting trip with conservative icon William F. Buckley. He was invited to write an opinion piece about the Columbia Policy for the *New York Post*, and mentored by conservative journalists from various outlets. The student went on to a successful career in the conservative movement, where he continues to work today.

The contrast between our experience as young feminist activists and that of our conservative counterparts could not be more stark. But this represents a much larger trend.

- The Leadership Institute, which trains thousands of American college students to be effective right-wing activists, was formed in 1979 and has since expanded to include a budget of \$9.1 million. The Institute has formed hundreds of independent campus conservative groups, to which it provides strategic, networking and financial support as needed.¹
- The annual budget of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, the leading right-wing organization focusing on American college campuses, increased from \$1 million to \$6 million, in the years between 1989 and 2001.²
- Conservative foundations have begun a campaign to create academic centres devoted to conservative thought, providing funding for colleges and universities to hire right-wing faculty. According to the National Association of Scholars, 37 of these programs exist. Twenty were created in the last three years.³
- Evidencing intense recruiting efforts on campuses, 60% of registrants at the 2010 Conservative Political

Action Conference (CPAC), a major annual gathering of conservative activists, were college students.⁴

The Right has prioritized efforts to build young leaders. They have spent tremendous time and money developing structures enabling new activists to enter their communities, educating those activists on the core tenets of the movement, and providing them with the skills they need to lead. Many older anti-oppression activists, on the other hand, have often focused on maintaining their own power within stagnant or even dying organizations. Somehow we seem to have adopted a movement-wide sense of what amounts to social justice Calvinism — the idea that there are a few perfect individuals who have it “right,” while everyone else is hopeless and not worth talking to. Instead of nurturing young

The Right has prioritized efforts to build young leaders. They have spent tremendous time and money developing structures enabling new activists to enter their communities, educating those activists on the core tenets of the movement, and providing them with the skills they need to lead.

activists, we reject them for failing to have a fully formed analysis of kyriarchy⁵ at an age when this would be nearly impossible, or worse, for having innovative ideas that challenge us, or for calling us out on our own replication of oppressive systems. Instead of building coalitions around specific changes that would improve people’s lives, we insist that everyone accept our entire philosophy. Instead of making a clear argument in favor of concrete institutional change, we engage in name-calling and attempts at shaming anyone who disagrees with us. We forget our ideals and become cynical, rigid ideologues.

By failing to reach out, and neglecting to mentor new leaders, we are clearly acting in ways that are destructive to an anti-oppression movement. And, while I’m sure the people my friend studies would disagree, I don’t think that anti-oppression activists are doing this out of selfishness or meanness. I don’t think we lack empathy or open-mindedness. I think we’re in pain.

Most of the people working to end oppression are working to end our own oppression. That means that, unlike conservative

activists, we never get a break from the hostility. Unlike conservative activists, we're not just trying to increase the power we already have, we're fighting for our lives. We can never just go home and watch TV, or just go to community centres or places of

We've learned from hard experience that any interaction with another person — even those we love most, even those who claim to be our allies — can become a gut-wrenching fight to assert our humanity. The vigilance is exhausting.

worship or contemplation and revive ourselves, or just go to a party and have fun. Even assuming we have the resources, we never know when the next blow will come, or where it will come from. We've learned from hard experience that any interaction with another person — even those we love

most, even those who claim to be our allies — can become a gut-wrenching fight to assert our humanity. The vigilance is exhausting.

Anti-oppression activists aren't falling down on the organizing job because we're hypocrites. We have big, real, deep reasons for failing to build community, and failing to reach out. We really do. I have all the empathy in the world for everyone who has ever felt too damn tired to explain one more damn time to someone dripping with privileged smugness that oppression does, in fact, exist, or too overwhelmed to provide the kind of hardcore mentorship necessary to build a strong new leader.

But.

If we don't find a way to do those things — to mentor new leaders, build community, and persuade those who disagree with us, we will lose. We'll leave the world worse. And to be honest, I'm not sure how much more the world can stand.

If we're going to be effective in building a movement, I believe some personal transformation is in order. Most urgently, we have to find ways to process our pain constructively, whatever that means for us. I don't know the best way to live with the fact that a lot of people won't ever see us as fully human. I can't tell anyone how to handle the daily humiliations and dangers. I certainly don't have any advice on the "right" way to wrap your mind around things like mass rape or the torture of children. Ultimately, I think we will all have slightly different ways of cop-

ing. For some it will take the form of communities specifically devoted to healing, or friendships with others who share their beliefs. Others will find peace in spiritual practice, which, at its best, can give us the ability to balance radical patience with radical urgency. Regardless of what we find for ourselves, acknowledging how hard it is to take these issues on, and making an effort to work with our feelings, is as important as any other aspect of anti-oppression work. It may be a cliché, but it is a cliché for a reason: if we can't find personal peace, I don't believe we're ever going to have the skills or energy necessary to build a more peaceful world.

Just as we have to find a way to process our pain and exhaustion in order that we have the energy to invite someone new to join our work, we have to find a way to communicate with people who disagree with us constructively. An anti-oppression movement that doesn't take the time to build new leaders or reach new communities starts to look pretty much like academia-feminism today: a few exhausted activists who eventually become women's studies or ethnic studies or sociology professors who mostly avoid anyone who disagrees with them, and who often rarely engage in meaningful social change efforts outside of academia. Add a handful of overworked lawyers locked in an impossible effort to hold back the tide of fascism, and stir.

It's a basic fact of grassroots organizing that movements can only be effective if they grow. That growth happens in two ways — by further involving the people who already agree with you, and by convincing new people of your perspective. In the case of the first group, the effort required to build a confident, effective new leader is fairly straightforward. However, it requires time, persistence, open confrontation of oppressive dynamics within your movement, and a willingness to give up some credit, along with some control over the shape of your work — efforts too many of us are unwilling to make.

In the case of the second group, the hard truth is that we only have two options: we can destroy our oppressors, or we can transform them. Even if the first option were possible — and I don't believe it really is — I would rather be oppressed myself than spend my days trying to destroy people.

We all know that most opposition to our work comes from those who benefit from our oppression. And here's the thing: the

beneficiaries of oppression have more power in all sorts of situations. White people end up running corporations. Men end up leading places of worship or running media outlets or becoming CEOs and making hiring decisions. Rich people decide which nonprofit organizations get to exist, and which ones never make it off the ground. Not to mention, pretty much everyone listens to people with privilege more intently, and with more respect.

In other words, privileged people are usually the people with the ability to change how the world works. And this means they can be useful for our movements. Oppressed people don't have nearly as much power to make the kind of institutional changes that could lead to widespread revolution in people's attitudes and behaviors (which is part of that whole "oppression" situa-

tion). Social change is complicated, and there are a lot of different elements to it. But one thing is certain: if we want to change society, we have to change the people who have power. If, as is often the case, we don't have the ability to get them out of

We have every reason to resent the fact that the burden of educating people about our oppression falls on us. It *is not* fair, and it is painful every time we engage in these conversations.

power, that means changing them internally. I'm not saying that we shouldn't work within our own oppressed communities as well, or that we don't need to organize and nurture ourselves as oppressed people — that work is essential. The leading edge of anti-oppression thought will always be with the oppressed. But we do need to make a meaningful effort to change the minds of those in positions of power, too. We need to recognize that an effective anti-oppression movement has a place for everyone — a way to be meaningfully involved, and a place in our vision of a better world.

We have every reason to resent the fact that the burden of educating people about our oppression falls on us. It *is not* fair, and it is painful every time we engage in these conversations. When people say we shouldn't be responsible for ending our own oppression, I agree. We shouldn't be. But we are. It is a simple fact that is hard to accept, but people *don't know what they don't know*. Without outside interference, it is highly unlikely that a person who is exposed only to CNN (or, worse, Fox) and Eminem

videos will come to recognize, understand, and oppose oppression on their own. If they personally benefit from that oppression, the odds become vanishingly small. Of course if the world were fair they would. Of course they *should*. But they won't. There are many reasons for this, perhaps the most influential of which is the fact that knowing what we know as oppressed people hurts like hell. That's why it's a privilege *not* to know it.

Especially when it comes to incorporating incredible psychic pain, minds don't change all at once. People will almost universally freak out the first time they are confronted with their privilege or complicity with oppression. But the fact that people often meet us with defensiveness and dismissiveness is not an indication that our work is hopeless. It takes the mind a while to process an idea that is truly new to it. The people who oppose us are only human, just like us. They aren't usually sociopaths, and they really do want to be good people. They won't change immediately, but they still can and do change. It will make us more effective if we can put ourselves in their shoes and relate our experience to theirs. Luckily, this is quite possible. We are capable of coming to understand the mindset of even our most hateful opposition, because we're not very different from them.

An example: I come from a mixed race background, but in most ways I seem white, and I have white privilege. When, as a feminist, I engage someone who has bought into patriarchy, and I start to feel like all I want to do is bop them in the nose (an urge which, incidentally, should remind us just how similar we can be at times to our oppressors), I think back to my first meaningful discussion of racism. I was 17, fresh out of a hometown that was almost entirely white, and a total train wreck on issues of race and racism. Like most white people, I had a very limited understanding of systemic and institutional racism, and virtually no understanding of the ways that racism intersects with other oppressions. I truly believed that racism had been "solved" by the civil rights movement. I am certain that the group of young black women I spoke with that day left the room feeling exasperated and hurt. It was the sort of conversation you might walk away from saying something to the effect of, "some people are just hopeless."

I remember that the interaction confused me for months. My entire worldview had been shaken, and a worldview isn't the kind

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of thing a person deconstructs and reconstructs instantaneously. I had the uncomfortable sense that there was something I wasn't understanding. But my attitude didn't dramatically shift until one day, after months of percolation, I realized with horror that racism was still an active force in the world — in *my* world — one that caused just as much pain as gender oppression.

I bring up this observation, which is extremely embarrassing to me now in its brilliant display of privilege, because it was my starting point. Shallow as my new awareness was, I had been emotionally transformed by connecting the experience of white supremacist oppression to *my own experience* of oppression as a woman. While I still had and have a lot of growth to do in learning how to be an effective anti-racist activist, it was a shift that set me on a path of taking responsibility for my own education about racism, and a commitment to intentionally seeking out new information. I understood why the myopia created by my white privilege was not acceptable, and I set about changing myself. A deeper understanding of racism eventually led to a deeper understanding of transphobia, ableism, fat hatred, class-based oppression, imperialism, and other oppressions that I benefit from. I'm no longer able to think about any anti-oppression movement in isolation, and see them as inextricably linked.

When I had that first conversation, my behavior was inexcusable. My way of thinking was inexcusable. *I should have been different.* But it is worth saying that I never would have changed on my own, and I never would have changed without being able to connect my own experience to the new information I had been given. This can't help but humble me when a man confidently proclaims to me that I'm failing to remain "objective" in my understanding of sexual violence, or tells me that I take gender oppression too seriously as if he truly believes he is providing me with useful new information. Everyone has to start somewhere.

As individuals shift their understanding from one paradigm to another, entirely different paradigm, it is a psychological necessity to maintain some coherence in their worldview. Beyond being emotionally necessary, this is actually quite sensible. After all, it is not the case that those who adhere to kyriarchal beliefs have no valid experience of the world — it is simply that they lack the frame to accurately understand many aspects of experi-

ence, and especially the experiences of oppressed groups they are not part of. This is why the most effective introductions to concepts of oppression aimed at privileged classes almost inevitably begin with an explanation of the ways in which that oppression harms them. Because this approach centres the experience of privileged people, it is therefore ultimately incomplete and problematic; however, the process of privileged people becoming willing to decentre their experience must begin from a point that resonates with their life as they understand it. Most of us are worse than we'd like to be at recognizing the suffering of others, but we naturally understand our own suffering quite well. We also naturally seek to escape this suffering. If we can bring privileged individuals to the understanding that their own suffering is caused by the oppression of others, they will eventually become our partners in struggle — not opponents or silent, apathetic “supporters.”

To take gender oppression as an example: the damage to the supposed beneficiaries of patriarchy is clear. The oppression of women harms men by requiring them to remain within a rigidly defined role, constantly chasing an impossible ideal of patriarchal manhood. It terrorizes men with the threat of being associated with anything “feminine,” often destroying their ability to recognize and respond to their own emotions, to relate to others, or to fully embody their artistic and spiritual lives. Most obviously, the oppression of women harms any men who fall sufficiently outside of these strictures as to be targeted for violence, discrimination and ostracism themselves. Further, oppression of women harms any man who cares for women, as the physical and psychological scars of patriarchy cause men indirect suffering in the form of feelings of helplessness and sadness in the face of loved ones' pain, diminished intimacy and trust in male-female interactions and relationships, and the harmful effects of secondary trauma. These themes have been well covered, and the positive responsiveness of men to activism which focuses on them is well established. Feminism is only now beginning to build a much needed men's movement with the help of this approach.

Where much of feminism, particularly white, middle-class feminism, has not succeeded is in offering an analysis of patriarchy as it harms oppressed men. Many activists give lip service to the concept of the interdependence of oppressions, without

genuinely engaging the implications of this, to the great detriment of anti-oppression movements. By failing to discuss the implications of patriarchy for oppressed men, we fall into the trap of universalizing the imagined ideal of a straight wealthy cisgender white man, thus reifying the same hegemonic identity that feminism seeks to decentre. We accept without question the

claim that patriarchy serves all men equally. In fact, patriarchy does great harm to oppressed men. It harms men of colour by allowing white supremacist culture to justify everything from the prison industrial complex to

Oppressions are interdependent, and part of building an effective movement against oppression will be recognizing this fact in practice.

imperialist war in the name of “protecting” white women and children. It allows the corporate agenda to crush workers’ rights by convincing poor and middle-class people to vote against their own economic interests in the name of restricting women’s freedoms. Its impact on the movement for LGBTQ equality is perhaps most obvious, with rigidly enforced gender policing causing direct harm to gay, bisexual, and transgender men. Just as racism has prevented and destroyed poor people’s movements that would ultimately have helped white people, patriarchy splits the progressive movement, often forcing the most gifted female activists to divide their energies or choose between movements, in the process harming oppressed men. It fractures virtually every anti-oppression movement, causing schisms that prevent men’s advancement. Oppressions are interdependent, and part of building an effective movement against oppression will be recognizing this fact in practice.

If we are going to reach people to grow the movement, we must help them understand oppression in a way that connects to their understanding and experience of the world as it is, not as we wish it was. In the case of oppressed people who hold privilege in some areas, recognizing the intersections of oppression and identity is key. Nearly everyone is oppressed in some way, and therefore shares an interest in ending all oppression. In the case of those who are not targeted for oppression in any obvious way, we have to be willing to have some empathy for them — to accept their starting point. We are, after all, telling people that

everything they have been taught is wrong. We're asking them to see that the pain in the world is exponentially greater than what they knew, and that they have been contributing to that pain. We're completely shaking the foundations of their identity and worldview. I've heard social justice activists use the analogy of coming to recognize oppressive social structures as "taking the red pill." I'd say it's more like a grenade.

I'm not claiming that privileged people refuse to acknowledge their privilege because oppressed people use the wrong "tone" in their demands for equality. That tired trope is almost always a bald attempt to control discourse, silence social justice activists, and make necessarily uncomfortable truths comfortable for privileged people. I'm certainly not saying that the best way to reach people is always with gentle hand-holding; sometimes a righteous display of anger is exactly what someone needs to understand how urgent an issue is. But we do have to begin from a place of respect for each person's life experience, and faith in their ability to change. It is neither effective nor consistent with an anti-kyriarchal worldview to give up on anyone. We believe that people can change. If we didn't, what would be the point of social justice work?

If we really are committed to building a movement that confronts kyriarchy on every level, I believe that our effectiveness will be commensurate with our willingness to make a constant effort to practice compassion. Compassion for ourselves as we find ways to hold the depth of suffering and despair in this world without giving up. And, just as essential, compassion for our oppressors with the recognition that if we had lived their lives, we would be who they are. I believe that if we can learn to work in this spirit of radical compassion and hope, we can develop the strong sense of community and mutuality in our movement that the radical free market libertarians seem to have fostered in theirs.

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social justice work primarily through a gender lens, she has come to view an intersectional understanding of oppression as key to effective feminist organizing. She is a recent graduate of Union Theological Seminary, and plans to pursue a career in chaplaincy.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jeff Horwitz, "My right-wing Degree," Salon, May 25, 2005 <http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2005/05/25/blackwell/>.

² Eric Alterman, "Ideas Have Consequences: So Does Money," Center For American Progress Website, October 14, 2004. <http://www.american-progress.org/issues/2004/10/b222111.html>.

³ Patricia Cohen, "Conservatives Try New Tack on Campuses," *New York Times*, September 21, 2008.

⁴ Kors, "Saving Freedom".

⁵ Kyriarchy: a neologism coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and derived from the Greek words for "lord" or "master" (kyrios) and "to rule or dominate" (archein) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression. (Glossary, *Wisdom Ways*, Orbis Books. New York 2001). While I first encountered the word through my study of theology, the writing of Lisa Factora-Borchers in her blog "My Ecdysis" allowed me to see its radical possibilities.