

Spiritual Activism & Liberation Spirituality

PATHWAYS TO COLLECTIVE LIBERATION



Claudia Horwitz & Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey



There is a new culture of activism taking form in the world—a new paradigm for how we work, how we define success, how we integrate the fullness of who we are and what we know into the struggle for justice. Activists are being asked to examine our current historical moment with real intimacy, with fresh eyes, fire, and compassion. Many of the once-groundbreaking methods we know and use have now begun to rot. Many of our tactics are now more than simply ineffective—they are dangerous. For agents of change, and all those who we work with, the detriment is twofold. We are killing ourselves and we are not winning. A life of constant conflict and isolation from the mainstream can be exhausting and demoralizing. Many of our work habits are unhealthy and unsustainable over the long haul. The structures of power have become largely resistant to our tactics. Given the intensity of our current historical circumstance it would be easy for us to rely on what we know, to fall back upon our conditioning and our historical tendencies, in our efforts to create change under pressure. Many lessons of the past carry wisdom; others are products and proponents of dysfunctional systems and ways of being in the world. A new paradigm requires a complex relationship with history; we must remember and learn from the past, but we cannot romanticize it.

Neither do we presume that the answer lies only in the new, the innovative, and the experimental. We carry the hearts and minds of the ancient ones of many traditions, across time and continents, while also connecting to the resources that surround us. Our intention is to survive and flourish in the landscape that we find ourselves living in. A new philosophy and practice of social change is emerging, one that grows out of an ethic of sustainability, spirituality, and a broader understanding of freedom. We are weaving old threads together in new forms and new ways of being.

Spiritual Activism and Liberation Spirituality

At its best, this new paradigm, which some of us are calling “spiritual activism” or “liberation spirituality,” is revolutionary. It provides us with deepened competencies and tools to go forward in this tangle of conditions history has prepared for us and to assume the roles we’re being asked to play. While the field growing up around this new paradigm is varied and vast, we are beginning to see each other and understand what we share:

- a deep commitment to spiritual life and practice
- a framework of applied liberation
- an orientation towards movement-building
- a desire for fundamental change in the world based on equity and justice.

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We are moving toward a *doing* that grows more deliberately out of *being*; an understanding that freedom from *external* systems of oppression is dynamically related to liberation from our *internal* mechanisms of suffering. It provides us with a way to release the construct of “us versus them” and live into the web of relationship that links all. Instead of being limited by the reactions of fight or flight, we encounter a path that finds fullness in presence. The humility of not-knowing allows truth to appear where fear once trapped us. We recognize the pervasive beauty of paradox, the dynamic tension between two simultaneous truths that seem contradictory. We enlarge our capacity to hold contradictions and to be informed by them. And our movements for change are transformed as a result.

Swimming in the Dominant Culture

The culture of activism in the United State is like a fish swimming in murky waters. It lives and breathes in the dominant culture and it is greatly impacted by its nature. Even as we are attempting to change this culture, we easily overlook how it has impacted us and how we recreate it. As we begin to understand and reckon with these attributes, we start to unravel their influence. Like anything, the more we invite and allow ourselves to notice and name *what is*, the more space, opportunity and permission conditions have to change.

All too often we are limited in our capacity to connect deeply with ourselves, with each other, and with reality because of deep instability in our being. We are knocked around by the tumult of our daily lives, battered by the constant barrage of bad news, of overwork and despair. We work more hours than our bodies and psyches can stand. We may deceive ourselves about the very nature of possibility and the openings for change, get stuck in postures of despair and cynicism or find ourselves caught up in a rigid relationship to time, task, and relationship. More is more, more is better. Long-term vision is sacrificed for immediate and inadequate gains. Opportunities for collaboration become mired in competition. Our anxiety around scarcity and the sense of a world on the verge of collapse disables us and disconnects us from our own internal sources of wisdom, vision, and spaciousness. None of these tendencies is inherently wrong, but each is limiting if not balanced with a more holistic and revolutionary approach.

From Suffering to Liberation

Because the ups and downs can be unbearable, many of us learn to intuitively disconnect from our bodies, our environments, our emotional worlds, and other people around us. We feel incapable of functioning in a world of deep intimacy and so we protect ourselves with the armor of anger, denial, self-neglect, and abuse—all in an effort to shield us from the depression, disenchantment, and discouragement we fear would overwhelm us if we gave it space. Our strategies often emanate from this place of suffering, forged of anguish and a polarized understanding of the forces at work in the world. It's vital that we learn how to see our own suffering, to have some ongoing relationship with the internal pain that has immeasurable impact on the people around us, the work we do, and our own happiness. If we're not healthy, we can't think as clearly. If we're only working out of anger, we reproduce the energy and momentum of destruction. If our visions for the world tend toward the fantastical or the apocalyptic, they cannot act as good guides for action.

We can look around the globe today and see how individual suffering comes to life in collective forms and how society is a manifestation and projection of our own internal turmoil. Individual hatreds lead to violence of all forms—state-sanctioned

oppression, violence, war, domestic and sexual abuse. Greed leads to unjust economic system, distrust of others, the construction of individuals as mere factors of production, non-livable wages, exploitation of natural resources and the insatiable desire to consume regardless of cost. Delusion in the news, media, and advertisements promote a sense of individualism and isolation, over-consumption and hubris on an individual and national level. We're familiar with these forms of collective suffering because they are much of the motivating forces behind our quest for justice.

And yet we know it doesn't have to be this way. We know human beings have access to a wellspring of wisdom, good will, and compassion. So, how do we begin to change our selves, our organizations and institutions, our society, our world? What are the tactics that lend themselves to the kind of transformation we are seeking in the world?

We desire freedom. We desire a way of being that expresses the best of what we have to offer as human beings— our truth, our joy, our complex intelligence, our kindness. For some, freedom comes when we experience ourselves and the world around us as sacred, when we have a consistent awareness of the divine and our embodiment of it. For some, freedom is paying attention to *what is* and accepting it, even as we also want space to dream about what *could be*, without censorship. Freedom thrives in individual wholeness and in strong, flexible relationships with others. We want to see deeply and we want to be seen. We want to remember, over and over again, how our destinies are woven together. We want a spirituality that holds the liberation of all people at the center and an activism that is not void of soul.

A liberated society and person is one that can hold the truth of different ways, perspectives, and mind states at once, where there is a complete acceptance of *the way things are* that also holds a prophetic vision of *how things could be*. We want collective liberation and we get there through spiritual practice, liberatory forms, a liberatory relationship to form, skillful group process, and embracing difference and unity.

Collective Liberation through Spiritual Practice

Spiritual practice builds a reservoir of spaciousness and equanimity that can provide us with access to our deepest capacities in the midst of great turmoil and difficulty, tension, and conflict. The key is in the ability to deeply and compassionately connect with our experience in any moment without clinging or rejecting, allowing for *what is* to arise and be engaged with wisdom without friction or resistance. Real, meaningful change can only happen in these places of compassionate and powerful acceptance of our own capacities and our personal and societal limitations. When we clearly open to *what is*, we gain the ground to imagine what might be possible. And in the places where we cannot be as breezy as we want to be we try to develop compassion for ourselves and each other, gentleness with our learning edges that allows us the space to grow where we can. We can create communities of practice, where ancient and traditional wisdom and practices are made relevant and current; they are shared in community. We can bring a depth of practice and learning to our spiritual path, and a strengthening of our own emotional container. Attaining some level of mastery in our own tradition or practice accelerates our learning and enhances our ability to experience and receive the wisdom and gifts from other traditions.

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Collective Liberation through Liberatory Forms

How do we embody ways of being and create ways of working that make real freedom possible? We do it by creating forms that lean toward freedom. We live in a world of form. Institutions, buildings, bodies, ideas—all are the forms which we use to negotiate and navigate through our interrelated lives. There are certain forms—institutions and practices—that function to quash, limit, or undermine our freedom. Some of the more obvious, all manifestations of collective suffering, include prisons, slavery, and totalitarian regimes. Some forms tend to promote liberation:

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- collective struggle in the form of grassroots movements, unions, and locally based organizing.
- farms, food cooperatives, and community supported agriculture models.
- religious and spiritual communities that call forth ecstatic expression, nurture contemplative refuge, and build strong community
- justice-centered retreat centers that offer an oasis for incubation
- creative protests that convey urgent messages in unexpected forms
- experiential and direct education that values students as experts of their own experience
- artistic venues that capture reality in compelling and uncharted ways
- forms of communication that leave us feeling animated and inspired rather than drained and beat up
- local merchants founded in an ethic of fair economics and community interest
- communal and intentional living experiments

Collective Liberation through a Liberatory Relationship to Form

New, innovative forms that aim for justice and lean toward freedom do not guarantee true liberation. We know the depths of suffering and oppression that can be found within our so-called revolutionary institutions—from unions to collectives to communist systems of government. This is because *form itself is not freedom*. Our willingness and ability to develop a revolutionary relationship to forms, to institutions, to ideas, to practices, is equally important to our success as the forms themselves.

There are numerous examples of physical, mental, and spiritual liberation occurring within the confines of oppressive forms such as prisons or slavery. Nelson Mandela, Malcom X, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Victor Frankel all had profound experiences of awakening while in the confines of prison walls. True freedom is realized when we develop the internal capacity to not be the victim or captive of any form, of any experience, of any condition. This means deeper understandings of who we are and what is needed in a given moment are based on realities beyond the conceptual, the intellectual, the known. This depth comes through contemplative practice, through worship, through communion with the divine, through ceremony. When we act out of *faith* (not necessarily in a divine being or external force) and align fiercely with *what is*, we gain power, strength, and presence that enables our actions to be driven by wisdom and compassion rather than craving, aversion, and delusion.

Collective Liberation through Skillful Group Process

We can practice liberation in our group forms, appreciating the energetic and intellectual dimensions of a group field when real skillfulness is present. We recognize liberation in a group; we see it, we hear it, or we feel it. We can sense

when a group is operating with a high degree of wellbeing in their culture. Sometimes it is most visible in models of leadership and decision-making which operate with honesty, respect, and cultural relevancy. Privilege, power, and rank are acknowledged and engaged. Issues below the surface of daily life are consistently brought to light. When groups are operating with a certain level of internal and external freedom, change is not shunned, but welcomed. Relationships are resilient; people feel supported and challenged in good balance. There is value placed on imagination and intuition, on creativity and story, both as a mode of individual expression and as a way of accessing the collective psyche.

Much has been written about skillful group process. In brief, it entails deep listening, moving from a place of faith, the ability to hold space for dissent, understanding the roles and needs of both individuals and the group as a whole, and taking decisive action when appropriate. Skillful group facilitators recognizes there is a dance between structure and flexibility, between knowing and not knowing, between cutting each other some slack and prodding each other to be more rigorous. The organizing principles of collective liberation encourage authenticity and disagreement. We embrace conflict as a powerful tool for learning and growth. We see times of challenge and struggle as an opportunity to go deeper.

Collective Liberation through Embracing Difference and Unity

One of the fatal flaws of both spiritual and progressive movements is the inability to powerfully embrace both difference and unity. When unity becomes a habit, conformity results and we don't have enough creativity to thrive. When differences dominate, we don't have enough unity to accomplish anything significant. Too easily, we view difference with suspicion and fear, a factionalism disintegrates rather than strengthens. We lose space for varied expressions of our humanity. Or, we get caught in the trap of wanting everyone to agree to one strategy for collective movement. The work of politics disallows dissent or distinction in favor of expediency and the "party line" or it results in rebellion, marginalization, and fragmentation. In the spiritual world, an insistence on "the oneness of all life" or submissive faith in God can prevent a healthy attending to meaningful conflict, the realities of oppression, and the internal and external methods of domination and control.

We can create ways of being and acting that are strong enough for both difference and unity. Our ability to work powerfully across multiple lines of difference is dependent upon our ability to connect intimately with our selves, our vision, and each other. We believe that the fundamental purpose of connecting around a common experience of humanity, of living and breathing in our oneness, is to be able to healthily engage, explore, and celebrate our very real differences as people. And that engaging in collective and individual spiritual practice is a method that uniquely allows for the skillful development of both of these capacities. We are learning to be inclusive in a way that doesn't disable us, more willing to see that we can be allied without being the same. Unity that is complete connectedness is called "love." But love is more than the expression of deep emotion or the pull to intimacy. It is a love that can become intimate with grief, stand firmly in the fire of conflict, and witness horror without recoiling. It is the kind of love that keeps our senses open and does not shrink from truth. It is relentlessly inclusive.

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Moving Forward...

Spiritual activism and liberation spirituality are ways of being and acting that encourage an intimacy that retains discernment. With ease and with care, we can find ways to link the powerful urges for freedom inside ourselves with the collective urge for freedom that humanity has known since the beginning of time. We can commit to ongoing analysis of and consciousness around our dominant culture, its forces of oppression and how these affect our work. We can develop a nuanced understanding of what it means to live and work across multiple lines of difference. And we can create the conditions that allow us to move from suffering to collective liberation.

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