HEALTH JUSTICE

Healing-Centered Leadership
A Path to Transformation

by Shawn A. Ginwright

> The only path to reimagining the future is through healing our collective trauma and restoring a sense of possibility in our work. This can only happen when we foster a collective imagination that restores communal wisdom and sets a path toward more humane ways to show up in life.

Editors' note: *This article was adapted from* The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves *by Shawn A. Ginwright (North Atlantic Books, 2022).*

The uncertainty in his voice was evident, even through Zoom. All the teachers in the meeting were frustrated by the lack of leadership and guidance regarding how they were supposed to teach and provide after-school programming in the midst of a pandemic. There just wasn't a blueprint for that.

Everyone could tell that the new Black superintendent was in over his head and didn't want anyone to know it, and was pretending that he had all the answers. The truth, of course, was that no one had the answers for how to support students and their families when schools had to close unexpectedly and for an unknown length of time. Some teachers expressed concern that the central office wasn't listening to their requests for guidance about how to teach virtually. A few teachers raised their voices in anger in response to the superintendent's inadequate comments, and others hurled insults at each other. The Zoom meeting was thick with tension, and nearly all thirty little square boxes neatly and clearly framed an angry face. The meeting itself, however, was anything but neat and clear.

YOU CAN'T SOLVE DEEP PROBLEMS WITH SHALLOW TOOLS

All leaders at some point come face to face with moments like this—when the answers we need don't come easily, and the solutions can't be found neatly

"BREATHING ON THE MOON (AFTER NAUDICA WILLIAMS)" BY AMIR KHADAR/WWW.AMIRKHADAR.COM. REPUBLISHED FROM *BLACK FREEDOM BEYOND BORDERS: MEMORIES OF ABOLITION DAY* (WAKANDA DREAM LAB, POLICYLINK, AND THE BIG WE, 2018, WITH PERMISSION)

When we focus on solving surface problems, it's like we are playing the game Whac-A-Mole, because it puts us in the position of having to respond to the next problem that shows up— and the next, and the next.

tucked away in leadership textbooks. For leaders of color, these leadership challenges are exacerbated by racism, intensified by inequality, and compounded by injustice. Inequality, in all its forms, doesn't only block opportunities; it also breeds distrust, skepticism, and fear. Researchers have studied this process among folks of color; they call it racial "weathering."[1] The term refers to the ways that poverty and social, political, and economic exclusion create stress and insecurity and, over time, like paint on a house, weather away our health and clarity. This is precisely what was occurring during that Zoom meeting. These educational leaders were trying desperately to solve deep problems with shallow tools. Sometimes, in our efforts to change systems and improve communities, we simply don't have the right tools to name and heal from the wounds inflicted by racism, sexism, and uncertainty in our work.

Somewhere along the way, however, we have bought into the myth that grinding harder, creating the perfect strategy, or having a deeper analysis of our problems is enough to solve them. Grinding harder, creating the perfect strategy, or having a deeper analysis of our problems doesn't get at the deeper, more fundamental issues that plague our organizations and movements for justice. *Trust*, *vision*, *wholeness*, *humane relationships*, and *hope* are the tools required for deep change in our work. Yet these spaces do not exist in our work as we now know it. As a result, this absence has been the Achilles' heel of our efforts to transform our organizations in a deeper way. Transformational change requires that we explore a few myths about social change.
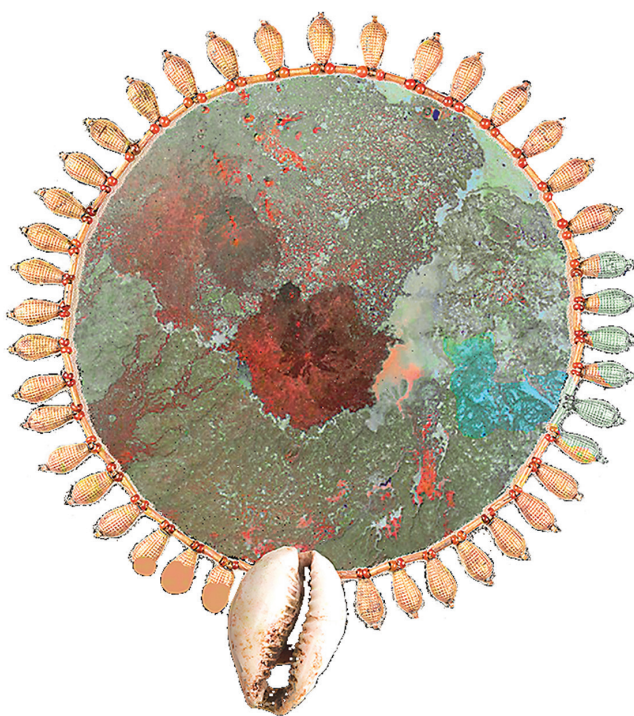
FOUR MYTHS ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE
Myth 1: Deep Change Can Be Achieved through Shallow Solutions
I've heard from policy-makers, educational leaders, social justice advocates, and community organizers that all that really matters in community change is that we remove the barriers to fairness. This is not to discount the efforts of folks who tirelessly work to reduce the structural impediments to equitable healthcare, employment, housing, jobs, and police accountability. These inequalities, to name just a few, are indeed barriers, and their removal is important in order to improve the quality of life for individuals and communities.

Yet, we must recognize that deep change cannot be achieved through shallow solutions. Our solutions rarely address the root of the problems we are trying to solve. Fear, scarcity, division, distrust, isolation—all are at the root of many of our organizational and social problems. Rather than trying to heal fear, scarcity, division, distrust, and isolation—which is a very hard thing to do—we choose to address the symptoms of these fundamental problems. We address racist policies but never address the xenophobic fear that created them. We respond to gender inequality but leave in place the toxic masculinity that created it.

When we focus on solving surface problems, it's like we are playing the game Whac-A-Mole, because it puts us in the position of having to respond to the next problem that shows up—and the next, and the next. For example, I understand why our communities have advocated for policies requiring police officers to wear body cameras. However, body cameras are just a surface solution to a deeper issue. Body cameras don't train police in antiracist behavior, and they fail to address racial fear and anxiety officers hold about Black people. Body cameras don't require police officers to unpack

DETAIL OF "BREATHING ON THE MOON (AFTER NAUDICA WILLIAMS)" BY AMIR KHADAR (SEE P. 31)

and reflect on their subconscious (and conscious) biases. Nor do they do away with the historic and current racism that lies at the root of policing in this country, which supports those biases. Deep change in policing and community safety will require us to rethink policing as we know it.

Myth 2: The More Power We Have, the More Change We Can Create

For years, I have worked with community organizations and young people, and have focused on building power. I learned that I had been thinking about power as a collective action attained by withholding labor, boycotting, or raising awareness about an issue in order to force some desired change. The one problem with this form of power building is that it doesn't address our collective trauma or our need for individual healing. Our definition of power is too narrowly defined and externally focused on activities that influence resources and policy. But power also comes from our capacity to heal our collective pain resulting from intergenerational trauma, present-day hopelessness, and persistent rage against injustice. This alternative form of power is an "inside job" that is cultivated when we speak our truth, fostered when we are vulnerable with one another, and strengthened when we take time to reflect on our relationships with others.

This myth about power is not one to be taken lightly. Consider how community organizing can lead to important structural policy-change wins yet is unable to account for the stress and emotional toll that it can have on individuals, families, and organizations. The power we gain from healing our relationships and restoring hope provides us with the deeper transformative changes we need.

Myth 3: We Can Strategize Solutions for Social Change

Most of us spend time creating really precise maps to vague and unclear destinations. The lie we tell ourselves is that if our strategies (or maps) are clear and precise, we can solve the problems of income inequality, climate change/environmental injustice, and structural racism. We focus on creating the perfect strategy (map), because we believe the myth that we can *strategize* solutions to achieve deep change. (By "strategizing solutions," I mean the mechanistic and technical application of data, information, and plans to solve intractable social problems.)

This myth showed up in my work with a division of a large city government that wanted me to support them in building equity into their systems and to design ways to train their workforce in healing-centered strategies. My team quickly learned that the city division viewed racial inequality and exposure to trauma in the city entirely through the lens of sophisticated population data: If X population has Y exposure to trauma, then the solution should involve higher doses of Z. They were searching for the perfect evidence-based strategy that they could plug into this equation. The issue (racial inequality and trauma exposure) was approached as a type of math problem, ignoring the nuances of human emotion and community resilience. Additionally, the levels of bureaucracy in the division had created a technical and mechanistic way of thinking about the issue: efficiency, order, redundancy, inputs, and outputs. The division's leaders were largely removed from the issue they wanted to solve, and they wanted my team to engineer a solution rather than work with the community to discover one.

Myth 4: "Us Versus Them" Is Concordant with Social Change

Oftentimes, we view social change as "us versus them"—and it's hard not to. Our history and our lives remind us every day which groups we belong to and which groups we don't. In fact, research shows that humans are wired for this. Anthropologists and primatologists have observed that "us versus them" exists in the natural world and has contributed to human survival.

But even though there is a natural human tendency to see the world as "us versus them," it's a myth when it comes to transformative social change. In fact, it's important to work against this tendency. "Us versus them" breeds "othering"—the process of labeling groups of people with negative attributes and then identifying with the positive attributes of one's own group. This process ultimately draws thick and hard boundaries around who is human and who is not. "Us versus them" thinking is precisely what created slavery, Jim Crow racism, the lynching of African Americans, the genocide

of Native Americans. "Us versus them" is a deeply colonized way of thinking—it is the root of the white supremacy that created the conditions for dehumanization globally.

Capitalist culture has cultivated this way of thinking, and it can be seen in our work every day. Take, for instance, how foundations often view nonprofit organizations as "grantees," a term that centers power and enshrines the privilege of the donor. "Us versus them" thinking has shaped the ways that foundations conceptualize how change occurs, how we interact with community partners, and how we choose who gets funded and who doesn't.

PIVOT TO HEALING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

Our challenge is to let go of these myths and embrace a set of truths that can effectively guide our work and our lives. What does it take to heal a broken society? How do we begin to pivot toward values that build greater connection and meaning? The solutions to these challenges require a deeper shift in our values and in our ability to heal from the wounds of racism, sexism, and homophobia. This change will require a new form of leadership that is based in cultivating empathy, compassion, and connection. When we do this, we begin to heal ourselves and our communities. The bottom line is, when we let go of these myths, we begin to embrace a healing-centered form of leadership.

Our sector needs a fundamental shift in our values—a pivot in how we think, connect, act, and work. A pivot is a small change in direction from a single point where we are now. It means that through one small change in direction, over time we can get to where we want to be. A pivot is not a complete abandonment of what we know; rather, it braids together what we know with how we feel and who we wish to be. For example, in basketball, a pivot requires four interwoven and seamless steps. When a player has the ball, they pivot in order to advance the ball downcourt. This pivot requires that (1) they stop momentarily and reflect on what is happening; (2) they have awareness of the relationships of other players around them; (3) they maintain focus on the goal without distraction; and (4) they calmly and confidently flow into another direction. You don't see all of this, of course, because it happens in an instant. *That's* healing-centered leadership, and precisely what we need in times of deep uncertainty and trauma.

Healing-centered leadership acknowledges how we *all* have been harmed, and focuses on restoring relationships across differences. This means that healing-centered leaders practice empathy over blame, compassion over complacency, and curiosity over criticism. The only path to reimagining the future is through healing our collective trauma and restoring a sense of possibility in our work. This can only happen when we foster a collective imagination that restores communal wisdom and sets a path toward more humane ways to show up in life.

Specifically, healing-centered leadership is based on our ability to make four pivots. The first is a *pivot from lens to mirror*. Instead of viewing the world through a thick lens— that is, as analysts of social problems—we must view it as a mirror of ourselves. This involves the practice of self-reflection and exploration of who we are as individuals and how we contribute to the world we wish to create.

The second is a *pivot from transactional to transformative relationships*. Most of us have been trained to lead, teach, and work with others in highly technical ways. Transactional relationships are efficient, but insufficient for healing. Transformative relationships in our professional and personal lives cultivate deeper human connection through vulnerability, empathy, and listening.

The third is a *pivot from problem fixing to possibility creating*. Historical exclusion, scarcity mindset, and zero-sum thinking resulting from structural racism and inequality come with a psychic cost. Leaders often focus more on eliminating problems and not enough on creating possibilities.

The last is a *pivot from hustle to flow*—transforming our addiction to frenzy, which is one toxic result of our capitalist culture, into the calm awareness of how we create quality space and time for the things that matter most. We all know what it feels like to be addicted to frenzy. Our days are filled following the commands of our to-do lists. We are always busy, behind on pesky tasks, overcommitted, and in a rush to the next meeting or event. If we can admit it to ourselves, we know deep down that we get a great deal of satisfaction from this particular addiction. We say to ourselves, "If I'm busy, I'm important and I matter." However, like any addiction, this gratification obscures a core truth: that our addiction—in

this case, to frenzy—gets in the way of our healing and well-being by keeping us forever focused on the "next thing."

OUR ONLY PATH FORWARD

We have an opportunity before us to transform and reimagine our work for social change. Our society sits directly between trauma and transformation—an old world and a new one. Our goal, as leaders who have dedicated our lives to improving our society, is to move boldly into a new world, leaving the trauma from the old world behind. But to do this, we will need new tools—new ways of thinking and relating to one another that heal us all.

Perhaps that is what the superintendent learned during that heated Zoom meeting with teachers and educational leaders. Without warning, he did something transformative. He lowered his head, closed his eyes, and paused in silence. He took a deep breath and exhaled—and when he raised his head, we could see that his eyes were watering, and we could feel that something important had shifted. He said, "The truth is . . . I don't know what to do! I'm sorry if I've been hiding that from you. The only thing I know for certain is that we have to work together as a team—no, no, not a team, but a *family*—in order to get to the other side of this." The superintendent's heartfelt confession created a shift for everyone almost immediately. Little red hearts began to pop up in those little square boxes, and the tone of the meeting became more humane—kind and contemplative. The meeting's mood transformed after that, as if his confession had cleared a path forward, removing the emotional clouds of confusion for everyone.

NOTE

1. Fathima Wakeel and Anuli Njoku, "Application of the Weathering Framework: Intersection of Racism, Stigma, and COVID-19 as a Stressful Life Event among African Americans," *Healthcare* 9, no. 2 (2021): 145.

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