

BIRTHING A JUST AND LOVING WORLD

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In 2024, we are living in an absurd reality. Like many of you, I feel intense pain as we witness the horrors of intensified ethnic cleansing in Gaza. Daily, we watch a human slaughter occurring in real time. We see genocides occurring around the world knowing our tax dollars allow the US government to fund the carnage. People everywhere are rising to demand justice, but we have not halted the killing machine.

Three years ago, during the height of the global pandemic, the horrors of how the United States handled the crisis seemed unimaginable. I remember my pain was sharpest when I held my 11-year-old son, Camino, as he witnessed the inhumanity our country was capable of. We saw fellow community members working in inhumane conditions as meat packing workers, agricultural workers, healthcare workers, and other low-wage workers. Since the origins of this country, people have been treated as disposable and subhuman. Yet, it became more starkly visible during the pandemic. As mass evictions occurred around us, families we were close to were running out of resources to survive—food, cleaning products, money, and housing. An explosion of collective care and local mutual aid projects emerged to support our communities as the government (local, state, and federal) failed.

During the global health crisis, government authorities in the wealthiest country in world history did not systematically test for the virus, produce personal protective equipment needed, or ensure the safety of healthcare providers. Instead, they revealed the violent contradictions of our society. The most “essential” workers were the least paid. Human beings considered “illegal” produced the food to keep the rest of us alive. Mass layoffs hit hard in the retail, service, and restaurant industries and informal work sectors. And the digital, educational, and police surveillance divides grew even more obvious than ever. The pandemic exposed the true nature of the prison and immigrant detention system as death camps with a profit motive. The profit logic of the healthcare apartheid system showed its incapacity to keep us safe.

As billionaires grew wealthier, the pandemic made clear that our society's priorities are upside down: community health and caregiving work is the necessary, often invisible, work that keeps society functioning. The feminized work of nurturing, cooking, cleaning, elder-caring, child-rearing, and nursing are actually more "essential" and important than profit-making work.

Despite all the beautiful community efforts during the pandemic, individualism pulls us like a powerful undertow. Living in solidarity with others is missing from our mainstream cultural experience in the United States. We live in a carefully crafted society premised on the faulty prioritization of individual advancement. The false paradigm of individualism has never been clearer than in the last few years.

Even though most of us have the deep human inclination to take care of each other, society has conditioned us not to think about collectivizing our lives. We have been well schooled in the basic private property concepts that go beyond land, money, and other material resources, and encompass our thoughts and ideas as intellectual property. Our training instructs us not to reveal our salaries to friends and co-workers. It is as though the profound sense of solidarity that lives in our bones has been stripped from us to make the US superpower. Often those who have the least share the most. In many global south countries, daily practices of solidarity, with collective kitchens, childcare, and other needs, are still commonplace. Here in the United States, developing collective practices to live more simply so that others may simply live has been harder to weave into our collective consciousness.

Today, my 11-year-old son is 14. He now holds me as we witness a more horrific slaughter. The current events unfolding in Palestine show the immense potential for this heteropatriarchal racist capitalist empire to commit even more atrocious acts.

As an organizer, I believe that devastating crises also hold opportunity. I'm still holding on to Arundhati Roy's insight.

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."

As a midwife, I am living this moment with a deep understanding that the portal is still open! The question is: how do we move beyond the current limits of our individual and collective imagination of what is possible? How do we harness our collective people power and find the physical, emotional, and spiritual fuel needed to use this moment in history to transform ourselves, our communities, and our society?

Many of us have been practicing for this moment for years, building alternatives to the institutions that were not supporting our needs. We are inspired by the beautiful social experiments from the Black Panther Party's free breakfast program and the community health programs of the Young Lords to the encampments and settlements of the MST (the Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil and so many others. Over the last twenty-five years, many of us have built grassroots projects to meet community needs from alternatives to calling the police to free healthcare programs, accessible, holistic, and culturally based. While we are practicing our shared vision of the world we want to live in, we are expanding and strengthening the web of meaningfully connected personal relationships to grow our collective force. It is only through these deeply rooted local efforts that we will have the stamina to articulate and sustain the powerful national movements growing right now.

There is no quick fix, and it won't be easy. It took centuries to build oppressive systems and institutions, and they won't transform and be reborn overnight. Yet another way of life is possible.

Imagine local governments that nurture and support all residents, prioritizing true repair for those who have historically been most harmed. Envision allocating the \$\$\$ billions spent on the so-called "defense budget" towards caring for basic human needs and providing plenty of additional resources to support all communities to thrive. We cannot give up on this vision!

What is the fuel that will sustain us and our organizing toward a fundamental transformation of society? I was trained as a community organizer and taught to engage people by "agitating" them to connect to their anger against injustice to fuel their participation and build their commitment to a shared struggle.

What I now know as a midwife/partera and health provider is that living in an unjust society impacts communities on many levels, including our individual physiology (all the functions of the living organism that are our body). The chronic stress of structural inequities, including racism, sexism, and the economic exploitation of capitalism, cause unnecessary wear and tear to our bodies. Adding anger, even righteous anger, to the overload of chronic stress people are experiencing only further weathers the body.

The fuel we need today to sustain ourselves is more profound. Feeling intense love for our families and communities provides a well that is much deeper. When you say the word PROFUNDO in Spanish, you can get a feel for the depth I am talking about here. Have you ever felt that intense loving care and protection that we human mammals feel for our babies, little ones, or vulnerable loved ones? That feeling turns you into a superhuman, a relentless beast, like a mama bear, that is capable of anything to protect loved ones. Only this fierce love can stretch us beyond our imagination and open a whole new universe of untapped power.

Imagine what happens when that energy becomes the driving force for our organizing work, when what moves us is not the intense flame of anger against injustice but devoted fierce unwavering burn of love for our little people, our elders, and our entire communities. This love provides INFINITE fuel.

As opposed to activating toxic stress hormones, the fuel of fierce love activates another part of our physiology: oxytocin, the hormone of love, as experienced in childbirth, during an orgasm, or even with a twenty second intentional hug. This hormonal response is protective to all our organ systems.

The current greed-driven human slaughter in Gaza is the moment to prepare ourselves for the work ahead, just as we prepare for the birth of a baby. Just like during a difficult complicated labor, we must be mindful of how we approach this moment in history. We cannot fall into despair, overwhelmed because the task ahead seems impossible, and even futile, so that we want to give up. Just like a persistent midwife, in this moment we must be patient, attentive, loving and ABSOLUTELY RELENTLESS.

In this global moment, we are now in what we midwives call a “protracted labor.” And we haven’t even gotten to “transition” yet, the stage of labor where many of us get cold sweats, uncontrollable shaking and even vomiting. Transition is the storm before the calm, a phase in the physiology of labor in which almost every laboring person feels they can no longer continue, though the birth is imminent. In this moment, we still have a long way to go, and the labor will get more intense before the birth. Just like with any difficult labor, we must remember to stay in the moment, breathe, and take one contraction at a time.

As people residing in the US empire—the belly of the beast or the brain of the monster—how do we remember to keep living with our hearts cracked open, where we don’t let ourselves go numb again? Six months into this current wave of genocide in Gaza, we cannot revert to our “normal” routines where we avoid feeling the sub-human living conditions of many who are close and far away. The visceral pain of witnessing unimaginable horror must serve a larger purpose. This full unveiling of the monster that is the empire can serve to steer us forward. We have the opportunity to use this clarity to guide our intentional organizing to build collective people power. Now is the time for strategic, constant, and persistent collective actions (large and small, public and intimate) toward a fundamental societal transformation. We must live with our hearts in our hands, as the compass that guides us. Yes, this labor is protracted, yet we WILL birth a just and loving world!

(2024)