What is/isn’t transformative justice?

I’ve been thinking a lot about transformative justice lately.

In the past few months I’ve been to a couple of gatherings I was really excited about, and then found myself disappointed, not because drama kicked up, which is inevitable, but because of how we as participants and organizers and people handled those dramas.

Simultaneously I’ve watched several public take downs, calls outs and other grievances take place on social and mainstream media.

And I’m wondering if those of us with an intention of transforming the world have a common understanding of the kind of justice we want to practice, now and in the future.

What we do now is find out someone or some group has done (or may have done) something out of alignment with our values. Some of the transgressions are small – saying something fucked up. Some are massive – false identity, sexual assault.

We then tear that person or group to shreds in a way that affirms our values. When we are satisfied that that person or group is destroyed, we move on.

Or sometimes we just move on because the next scandal has arrived.

I’m not above this behavior – I laugh at the memes, like the apoplectic statues. I feel better about myself because I’m on the right side of history... or at least the news cycle.

But I also wonder: is this what we’re here for? To cultivate a fear-based adherence to reductive common values?

What can this lead to in an imperfect world full of sloppy complex humans? Is it possible we will call each other out until there’s no one left beside us?

I’ve had tons of conversations with people who, in these moments of public flaying, avoid stepping up on the side of complexity or curiosity because in the back of our minds is the shared unspoken question: when will y’all come for me?
The places I’m drawn to in movement espouse a desire for transformative justice – justice practices that go all the way to the root of the problem and generate solutions and healing there, such that the conditions that create injustice are transformed.

And yet…we don’t really know how to do it.

We call it transformative justice when we’re throwing knives and insults, exposing each other’s worst mistakes, reducing each other to moments of failure. We call it holding each other accountable.

I’m tired of it. I recently reposted words from Ryan Li Dahlstrom, speaking about this trend in the queer community. But I see it everywhere I turn.

When the response to mistakes, failures and misunderstandings is emotional, psychological, economic and physical punishment, we breed a culture of fear, secrecy and isolation.

So I’m wondering, in a real way: how can we pivot towards practicing transformative justice? How do we shift from individual, interpersonal and inter-organizational anger towards viable generative sustainable systemic change?

In my facilitation and meditation work, I’ve seen three questions that can help us grow. I offer them here with real longing to hear more responses, to get in deep practice that helps us create conditions conducive to life in our movements and communities.

1. Listen with ‘Why?’ as a framework.

People mess up. We lie, exaggerate, betray, hurt, and abandon each other. When we hear that this has happened, it makes sense to feel anger, pain, confusion and sadness. But to move immediately to punishment means that we stay on the surface of what has happened.

To transform the conditions of the ‘wrongdoing’, we have to ask ourselves and each other ‘Why?’

Even – especially – when we are scared of the answer.

It’s easy to decide a person or group is shady, evil, psychopathic. The hard truth (hard because there’s no quick fix) is that long term injustice creates most evil behavior. The percentage of psychopaths in the world is just not high enough to justify the ease with which we assign that condition to others.

In my mediations, ‘Why?’ is often the game changing, possibility opening question. That’s because the answers rehumanize those we feel are persecuting against us. ‘Why?’ often leads us to grief, abuse, trauma, mental illness, difference, socialization, childhood, scarcity, loneliness.

Also, ‘Why?’ makes it impossible to ignore that we might be capable of a similar transgression in similar circumstances.

We don’t want to see that.

Demonizing is more efficient than relinquishing our world views, which is why we have slavery, holocausts, lynchings and witch trials in our short human history.

‘Why?’ can be an evolutionary question.

2. Ask yourself/selves: what can I/we learn from this?

I love the pop star Rihanna, not just because she smokes blunts in ballgowns, but because one of her earliest tattoos is ‘never a failure, always a lesson’.

ARCHIVES (WEB AND MAGAZINE)

• Ben Appelrit Interview (2019)
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• Can Whole Foods Co-exist With The Homegrown Food Movement (2012)
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• Cook, Eat, Talk: Midwifing Movement
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• Dream Beyond the Wounds
• Everyone Is My Teacher: A Journey Towards Spiritual Leadership (pg 22)
• Generation Mixed
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• Interview for The Creative Independent
• Interview with Zenobia Jeffries at Yes! Magazine
• Love & the Apocalypse (Yes Magazine Roundtable)
• NTV Interview
• On UrbaLe Guin for Yes! Magazine
• Sublevel: Report – Recommendations for Right Now From a Future
• Thank You, Egypt
• The Lit Review Podcast on Emergent Strategy
• The Lit Review Podcast on Octavia’s Brood
• The Pleasure Done (Stitch magazine column)
• This Valentine’s Day, Let’s Choose Love Over Borders
• Transforming Ruckus: Actions Speak Louder
• Trauma Makes Weapons of Us All – Interviewed by Justin Scott Campbell (2018)

FOR THE CULTURE

• Playlist: 2010s Shuffle!
• Playlist: Queer Appalachia Virgo Playlist (raising funds for Mutual Aid)

LISTEN TO AMB

• All Go Interview (2019)
• BBC Radio on Brecht poem: Pleasure
• Chicago Humanities Festival conversation with Charlene Carruthers (2019)
• Collections with Michelle Brown, Interview (2019)
• Critical Connections (Allied Media Conference 20 Year Anniversary Podcast)
• CTZN Well Podcast Interview (2019)
• Femme Too Deep Interview (2017)
• For the Wild Interview on Emergent Strategy (2018)
• For the Wild Interview on Pleasure Activism (2019)
• Fortification Podcast (2018)
• Healing Justice Pleasure Activism Book Club with amb and Anika Swain (2019)
• Healing Justice Podcast Interview (Emergent Strategy)
• Healing Justice Podcast: Cast a Spell with amb (2017)
• Healing Justice: Imagination and Connection (2017)
• In Conversation with Chani Nicholas
• In Conversation with Omolali Williams
• Interview for Down for Whatever Podcast
• Interview for Hurry Slowly Podcast
• Interview by Bitch Magazine
If the only thing I can learn from a situation is that some humans do bad things, it's a waste of my precious time - I already know that.

What I want to know is, what can this teach me/us about how to improve our humanity?

For instance, Bill Cosby's mass rape history is not a lesson in him being a horrible isolated mass rapist. It's a lesson in listening to women who identify perpetrators, making sure those perpetrators are not able to continue their violence but experience interventions that transform them, make that injustice impossible. If the first woman raped by Cosby had been listened to, over 40 other women could have been spared.

What can we learn? In every situation there are lessons that lead to transformation.

3. How can my real time actions contribute to transforming this situation (vs making it worse)?

This question feels particularly important in the age of social media, where we can make our pain viral before we've even had a chance to feel it.

Often we are well down a path of public shaming and punishment before we have any facts about what's happening. That's true of mainstream take downs, and it's true of interpersonal grievances.

We air our dirt not to each other, but with each other, with hashtags or in specific but nameless rants, to the public, and to those who feed on our weakness and divisions.

We make it less likely to find room for mediation and transformation.

We make less of ourselves.

Again, there are times when that kind of calling out is the only option - particularly with those of great privilege who are not within our reach.

But if you have each other's phone numbers, or are within two degrees of social media connection, and particularly if you are in the small small percentage of humans trying to change the world - you actually have access to transformative justice in real time. Get mediation support, think of the community, move towards justice.

Real time is slower than social media time, where everything feels urgent. Real time often includes periods of silence, reflection, growth, space, self-forgiveness, processing with loved ones, rest, and responsibility.

Real time transformation requires stating your needs and setting functional boundaries.

Transformative justice requires us at minimum to ask ourselves questions like these before we jump, teeth bared, for the jugular.

I think this is some of the hardest work. It's not about pack hunting an external enemy, it's about deep shifts in our own ways of being.

But if we want to create a world in which conflict and trauma aren't the center of our collective existence, we have to practice something new, ask different questions, access again our curiosity about each other as a species.

And so much more.

I want us to do better. I want to feel like we are responsible for each other's transformation. Not the transformation from vibrant flawed humans to bits of ash, but rather the transformation from broken people and communities to whole ones.
I believe transformative justice could yield deeper trust, resilience and interdependence. All these mass and intimate punishments keep us small and fragile. And right now our movements and the people within them need to be massive and complex and strong.

I want to hear what you all think, and what you’re practicing in the spirit of transformative justice.

Towards wholeness and evolution, loves.

Author: Adrienne

VIRGO (Aug. 23 - Sept. 22): Your opting against the forces of darkness has got to do more than say “no.” A fierce, primal yes should be at the heart of your crusade.

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9 thoughts on “What is/Isn’t transformative justice?”

Matthew

July 10, 2015 at 16:37

Thank you so much for this article. I appreciate the honesty and generous invitation for us all to move toward transformative justice in all our relationships (group and individual).

I am so familiar with the fear that is invited, both having called folks out (especially off-line) and being scared to speak up because I see what passion in the attacks, a passion backed by lifetimes of oppression and trauma.

One question I ask in my facilitation and group work these days is “Where is the hurt?” Usually in these moments, I find more than one person has hurt, and both people can use a space to process it. Everyone deserve an opportunity for transformative justice. It doesn’t always happen in the same room at the same time, but (on a good day) my commitment toward justice helps me stick it out and feel the spirit of transformation.

Shakeses

July 10, 2015 at 22:29

(I actually edited for typos, so moderator, you should use this)

I appreciate this reflection. I think about this often. I am not above the occasional calling out. One of the things I wonder about is how to hone restorative practices, within a framework of transformative justice, when so few people nurture their own practice or have yet to really understand what it means to practice transformative justice. All of my training has always taught me to stray away from the “Why?” and to center more around what happened, who was harmed and how. I believe that we’re still sadly a far way off from being able to really engage with this type of work, as so many of us, socialized in america, have been taught to equate justice with vengeance. People want their pound of flesh and they call that accountability. People want public humiliation and punishment, and they’ll call that accountability as well.

Conversely, I see a usefulness in “calling out” certain people. I think some things can’t wait. Generally my code is something like “If this person’s behavior is immediately harmful; if this person has been given private opportunities to come to understandings with the persons they’ve harmed and have still not done the work; if we’re in danger,” then I feel like it’s okay to call attention to them in a public way.

But this is my personal code, not a set of guidelines that I expect others to follow, and here is where the waters get especially murky, right? Folks who work around and within issues of social justice want to believe that we’re all coming from the same places, doing the same types of work with the same level of intention. When this mythic bubble is perforated, this causes that feeling like the floor has dropped out beneath us. We scramble for the nearest thing to security that we can find and because so many of us are so damaged by our lives, by our histories, by being socialized in america, we react the way we’ve been trained; give them anger, give them vengeance, get rid of them.