

Where We Go Wrong in Equity Work: Separating Social Justice Efforts from True Movement of Healing

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This autoethnographic commentary includes anecdotes along with scientific background, ending with suggestions to do your best work as an equity warrior. It examines how, when working to dismantle racist systems, there are many setbacks that equity warriors face time and time again. The author suggests that “warriors” face re-traumatization when listening to the radio, watching the news, even viewing comedy shows—hearing triggering stories from the heated political climate repeatedly. She cautions about the very little attention given to the effect this has on our bodies as equity work is happening.

“But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”

— *Ta-Nehisi Coates*

“Pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb to it, how we deal with it, how we transcend it.” — *Audre Lorde*

I was listening to “*Biased*” by Jennifer Eberhardt as I was getting ready for my day, soaking up wisdom about the way our brains operate. While brushing my teeth, I saw large droplets roll down my face into the sink. Listening to Jennifer Eberhardt’s account of Terrence Crutcher’s murder by Officer Shelby in 2016, I was crying. Well, my body was crying. At some level, my mind was separate from my body. I hadn’t acknowledged the tears until I saw them and they did not stop me from moving on with my day at that very moment. I continued with my morning routine. I allowed the droplets to fall straight into the sink, instead of going down my face, to prevent ruining my makeup and showing up as visible signs of a tearful morning. I wiped my eyes and went off to work. When a colleague asked me how I was doing, I responded, “I’m good!” and a few moments later, I thought to myself, “Wow. Am I good? I should have taken a moment to process what was happening to me this morning.” Had I been denying the pain I was feeling? Looking back, it was not a great way to start my day. I needed to heal from it. I should have processed those emotions. I needed to store it in my body in a new way; transform it from the way in which it entered.

In the train station on my way to work, I saw an officer in a uniform I had never seen before, talking to a religious representative who was passing out pamphlets. I thought to myself, “I wonder where my father is today?” While he has been a U.S. Citizen for over 25 years, it occurred to me that my father, who had a similar accent as that woman being questioned by the officer, could find himself in a conversation with a comparable officer, who in my mind, was affiliated with ICE. It was sure to be an uneasy encounter in the current political climate.

I walked down the platform, turned on my headphones and heard “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah” podcast. He was speaking about the President’s tweets telling congresspersons to “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.” The recording played the rally attendees’ chant of “Send her back; send her back.” I felt my stomach turn. I decided I needed something upbeat to get me ready for the day, so I switched to Oprah’s Soul Session. I thought, “That should do the trick.” I can usually hear an uplifting spiritual message to carry me through my day. The episode was about Ava Duvernay’s “When They See Us,” documenting the story of the Central Park 5. I put on an Afrobeats playlist instead.

I continued on after my waterfall of tears in the morning, the scene at the train station, and the informational podcasts, to present an Implicit Bias Workshop in the Bronx. I proceeded to put myself in a proverbial line of fire, teaching others about the workings of our brains and how biases show up in education, vulnerably trying to make an impact on the NYC education system.

This is an attempt to begin to heal the wounds in the education system in New York City. My daily work makes small ripples throughout the city, throughout the state, on Native Lenape land. This is

land that has its own historical traumas, which reverberate throughout as we continue to perpetuate harm. Healing comes during every anti-racist and anti-oppressive conversation as we validate, inform, share, practice, assure, clear up, change, challenge, excite, and recognize the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in this country and in NYC. As educators begin to understand the harms we cause daily, unknowingly we are beginning to heal the system in small ways. Bit by bit.

At the same time, we put ourselves at risk, daily, to endure more triggers and traumas, which I call “zings,” that jab us, and that we often ignore. If we do not check these zings, we are liable to perpetuate more zings or worse; we can perpetuate more oppression through the hurt. If we don’t process each zing, and realize how it is impacting our emotional, physical, and spiritual selves, then we will no doubt take it out on others, in facilitation, on our teams, with close friends and family, and in interactions with a cashier or on the train. This unintentional ability to manifest my zings onto others can show up outwardly or inwardly, in various shapes of internalized oppression, not limited to feelings of numbness, silence, anger, and shame.

A number of educators in New York City have been facilitating equity work for a long time. But now, for the first time, there are city-wide efforts to make this work occur in as many schools as possible. Educators are participating in diversity councils and equity teams, leading and attending affinity groups, seeking out professional development in equitable practices, teaching culturally responsive lessons, and pushing their colleagues’ thinking in meetings. As this work happens, most educators are missing a vital piece of that work, one that is not highly researched and not even spoken about: a collective culture that allows for healing of the zings.

These educators take a breath, complain to coworkers, and move on. Or, they stay silent, to protect themselves, and unknowingly build up resentment. They share their experience with colleagues and maybe administrators and are surprised by the dysconsciousness they encounter. They experience double consciousness, as presented by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), dividing their identities into several parts, who they are with administrators, who they are with students, and who they are with colleagues. But these zings are not only experienced in the work. They also happen when we live. So, we have double healing to do. We do not want to speak from our wounds. When we do, we are liable to perpetuate the very same violence we are fighting against. This is not to say that “hurt people hurt people,” because that notion keeps oppressing anyone who has been hurt from an eventual place of power, but rather, that we should participate in ongoing healing to check and make sure we are in balance and are attuned.

The warning from flight attendants to “Put on your mask before helping others” is not enough to warn us educators to take care of ourselves. This statement is to be adhered to while in the emergency. We are already in an emergency in the education system. We are helping others to put the mask on while simultaneously trying to put it on ourselves. Jumping into equity work, day in and day out, causes small emergencies for us; we need to be healing continuously to maintain the movement of the system.

When working to dismantle racist systems, there are many setbacks that equity warriors must face time and time again. These setbacks can be discouraging and dehumanizing. Add the political climate, laws created to further oppress groups, statements by a congressperson to defend racism, and videos with racial undercurrents can trigger us when we are not consciously

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paying attention. Warriors face re-traumatization when listening to the radio, watching the news, even viewing comedy shows—hearing triggering stories repeatedly. Very little attention is given to the effect this has on our bodies as we work in education. Many teams who are working to improve systems do not pay enough attention to the self-care that is required to get back fruitfully into the racial equity game. While the term self-care is overused as of late, it is nonetheless vital to the cause, highly undervalued in education, and seen as entitlement in some organizing cultures. That said, we are much more accepting of individual-care but much less comfortable with collective-care. Individual-care is important, but in the end, we show up together to do the work, so we need to heal together, too. Intentional self-care is the declination of the bitter systems we are fighting against, and collective-care is not just a nonacceptance of those systems, but a refusal to participate in them.

The American Psychological Association’s survey on Stress in America (2016) found that sixty-six percent of participants in the USA say that the “future of our nation is a significant source of stress.” Fifty-seven percent were stressed by the current political climate. These numbers increased in 2017. They describe stress as a combination of emotional (worry, tension, irritability) and physical (headaches, insomnia,



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stomach problems) reactions. In 2018, the number of participants who found the future of the country to be cause of stress increased to sixty-nine percent and sixty-two percent of the participants found the current political climate to be a stressor (American Psychological Association, 2018; Keller, 2019).

The stress from political climates combined with an organizer's stress from their work has yet to be measured by APA, but it is likely that combining these factors would show a sharp spike. The *New England Journal of Medicine* states that the toxic stress of "hostility or discrimination" on individuals and communities "belonging to stigmatized, marginalized, or targeted group[s], impact[s] cortisol levels" (Williams and Medlock, 2017). How does this stress impact those who are experiencing the injustice? And those who are part of the minoritized group but also fighting for liberation? The "Spirit Murdering," coined by Bettina Love (2019), of Black and Brown students in education through structural racism and problematic frameworks also impacts those who are fighting for change. All of this adds up for an equity warrior. In schools, the lack of community healing while embarking on equity work takes a toll on the progress the equity work can make. This sabotaging of the work causes us to be less effective. We lose trust, motivation, and feel burnout in the very places we are attempting to heal.

In social work schools, there is a saying, "Things will get worse before they get better." It is a way that we deal with clients or families who regress as we are seeking to help. It is a way to stick with the work when it gets particularly hard, in order to see it through to the other side. Additionally, it is a way for clients to hear that they should not give up. In equity work, the same statement holds true. I tell superintendents and principals I work with that the tension that arises from difficult conversations is the manifestation of racial systems being dug up, turned over, and examined. Some people will leave the organization. Some will try to stop the work from happening. Others will become numb because they unconsciously need to protect themselves from re-traumatization. To undo a system that has been at work for centuries, we have to sift through the muck. But we must also make time for healing to occur. We have to be alive, in our spirits, emotions, and physical bodies, to do great restorative work in the community. This is emphasized when we can heal together as a community.

Community healing builds attunement. Attunement is a concept that is important in therapy, between therapist and client, especially in play therapy for children and also in parenting (derived out of Ainsworth's [1970] and Bowlby's [1958] attachment theories; and specifically used in Theraplay, Jernberg and Booth, 1999). Attunement is how reactive and aware one is to another's emotions and needs, and a co-regulation of emotions. An attuned relationship will have both individuals responding with reactions of language and behaviors based on what the other individual showcases. Attunement creates belonging. The triggers or zings we experience awaken survival strategies. These survival strategies can provide us with a temporary sense of security but can be damaging to

ourselves and others in the process. We have to look at organizing and healing as the same concept, instead of separating them. Then we can integrate healing into the organizing and begin to reduce the need for the survival strategies, thus being more attuned to each other as we work in equity.

There are many ways education systems uphold a refusal for healing to be a part of the movement while being steeped in examining disproportionality or talking about equity. Educators who embark on equity journeys take a huge risk. Because being a principal or teacher can become that person's entire identity, when the zings happen, it can shake the educator's core identity. Do I really know what I am doing? Did I say the wrong thing? Will this impact my classroom? Can I keep doing my job? Who am I without teaching? This equity work is making things tense in my school; should I focus on instruction? Equity work is not measured or evaluated the way test scores are, so the question becomes, which is more important?

Many educators make great organizers, but some movements participate in dangerous cultures of forced struggle. When organizers fight for those who are struggling, we can be in danger of building a culture of overworking. "The people I am fighting for are struggling so much that I cannot enjoy anything because then I feel guilty. And, it may look like I am not working hard enough." Plenty of educators start equity work because they have experienced an injustice. This can be empowering but can also lead us to thinking that self-care is an indulgence because in our imaginations, the people we are fighting for are not able to indulge. The "social justice work ethic" can be extremely tiring and harmful. Furthermore, for people of color and those experiencing systematic oppression as a part of life, the commitment to fight for others can be

particularly meaningful. It can also be that much more taxing to experience it alongside those you are fighting for.

The systems we are a part of encourage leaders to forget to connect amongst the politics, regulations, mandates, accountability measures. Leaders who are hesitant to care for themselves perpetuate a culture of working without examining the zings. As a leader, I have felt fearful of the connection of my team, when I was not feeling a sense of belonging myself. Some leaders will promote individual-care but neglect the community-care and most of the time it is because of a lack of knowledge of how to do just that. My nonprofit leadership program did not prepare me for this part of the work. Many programs teach research, finance, fundraising, but do not have the capacity to provide leaders with lessons of connection, effective teaming, and restoring of relationships. As a practitioner who works to challenge racist systems in education and mental health in NYC, I find there are not enough resources to manage healing for equity teams. When using texts that guide and orient us to the work, we need companion literature guides and strategies to address the pain and complications that arise, internally and externally, and manuals to address them communally.

Finally, white dominant culture norms impact education in a vast number of ways, accountability, punctuality, individualism, worship of the written word, perfectionism-- all play into the refusal to be collective, cautious, and take time to connect and heal. We are suspicious of pleasure and healing, and question if the work is really happening. Leaders are challenged to navigate the terrain and can remain unaware that the authentic relationships built through community conversations help to reject the white supremacy at play in our systems. At times, this part of the work feels like a huge risk. We are scared

to face each other; it is not the way in which many of us grew up in white dominant culture. When we choose white dominant culture over connecting, we further push the racist agenda.

Engaging in collective healing includes many different methods of equitable leadership and a push away from capitalistic, patriarchal, traditional models of leading. Community work can and should include many different facets. Provide space for the team to check in with others which creates genuine and authentic supportive relationships. Regularly acknowledge stressors with supervisees and ask what they are experiencing on the team and in the world. Reflect on the unspoken organizational methods your team is experiencing. Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak as equality in community voice is extremely important to healing. Encourage and provide activities for those interested in using art or writing to express as another way of ensuring community voice. This guarantees that your team is not organizing in crisis only. Equity teams tend to come together in moments of fear or panic. This ritualistic work ensures you are connected in preparation for those panicked moments and builds the team's capacity to restore.

Providing space to explore each individual's ancestral methods of healing can be a restorative way to reflect. What are rituals and traditions our families participated in? What repatriation and rematriation activities can be done to activate spiritual and emotional connections? Why are they important and how do they carry on today? If they don't, can the team try or practice some of them? Inviting (and paying) indigenous folx from your area to teach your team to release emotions and connect with the land or your ancestors can be a meaningful experience for teams working together. Engaging in ritual is what Malidoma Somé (1993, 1999) outlines as the

“anti-machine,” activating our need to live in relationship with other human beings and repairing what we have lost and reintegrating the fragments. Tying in ancestral values of the community you serve or your own ancestors can create healing activities and ceremonies for the community you work in or for yourself (without appropriating them. For more on appropriating, check out Lorretta Todd's 1990 definition.) What is it like for the team to sit together in ritual? Or to sit together in silence? What comes up? How does the team laugh together and experience joy? Are these random or purposeful moments of connection? These ways of spending time together can slow the zings down in your body and keep them from taking over. Connecting with your lineage can help you to find your purpose and make meaning of your work.

Some equity warriors are not ready for so much connection, including leaders, but they can be reminded that we want to organize through hope and joy and not only through pain. Ask such members for their input in the planning of the space. If you can heal together then that means you can build together. Revisit the purpose in the beginning of each community gathering: “Our team is committed to ensuring our humanity is a part of the work and creating empathy for each other when transgressions occur.” This type of leadership ensures there is a sense of connectivity on the team. When we are triggered or traumatized, the world feels chaotic and unpredictable, and we experience changes in our perceptions and imaginations (Van Der Kolk, 2014). Justice work often feels this way and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color may be walking in skin that feels unsafe daily. The “assaulted sense of self” as Ken Hardy (2013) discusses, explains how being stripped of dignity and the dehumanization impacts the mind, body and soul. Creating community check-in spaces can create regularity and a

predictability in an uncertain world. Trauma actually changes our brain chemistry but creating belongingness, mindfulness, and connection can reorganize our brains (Yellow Bird, 2018; Van Der Kolk, 2014). Collective healing initiatives are especially important after experiences of collective trauma to: promote opportunities for togetherness and storytelling, provide routines, re-establish rituals, and promote social cohesion (Saul, 2014). If we continue the traditional way, steeped in data and changing policies, we will be productive. We will change aspects of the system. But will it last? Will it transform into new pain and systemic oppression? Recently I arrived at a planning meeting for a disproportionality session we were facilitating. In our community check-in, a coworker said, “It is really hard for me to be in my skin today.” He talked about the racial encounter he experienced that morning at a previous meeting. “I realized when I was talking to my son on the phone after what happened that I am a little on edge today. If that shows up in this space, please know that this is why.” We set aside the agenda to provide support. The team empathized. A coworker validated his experience. Another related it to her own experience a week before. We took in a little bit of the colleague’s pain. We held it in the room. We sat with it silently for a few minutes. We prepared to take hold of another meeting with the person he had engaged with earlier. We helped him shift the feeling into a new feeling. He was able to transform it into his body in a new way. We reduced the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual malaise and took pieces of the trauma from him. We gave collective-care. We helped restore and repair the zings before he moved on to his own self-care. “Thank you,” he said. “I couldn’t focus on this meeting without knowing that we are all working towards the same end goal.

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To be reminded that when I am out there, that I have people here lifting and holding me up means I can go back out again.”

Other suggestions to ensure your work is being processed holistically is to try ongoing or as-needed mental health therapy with a person who works with organizers or has core beliefs similar to your own. Look for ancestral ceremonies that can help you create questions and find answers about your roots. Justice focused community gatherings and affinity groups provide space for sharing and collecting wisdom. Some healing centers look to provide the exact community-care outlined in this article.

For virtual or in-person collective healing: Harriet’s Apothecary, Minka Brooklyn, Who Heals the Healer, Center for Babaylan Studies

Online resources: Ancestral Resistance Offerings and Practices Zine, Universal Partnership, Sierra Seeds, Rematriation Magazine, The Nap Ministry

More reading: Emergent Strategy by adrienne marie brown, Turn This World Inside Out- The Emergency of Nurturance Culture by Nora Samaran

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