

Vision and the Pursuit of Constructive Social Change

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At this moment in history, when we are confronting the reality of systemic racism and when a global pandemic is revealing in deadly detail the consequences of extreme inequality, we need to pay attention to the process of social change.¹ The intolerable reality of African American men killed by police has drawn thousands of people around the world into public rejections of racist structures, symbols, and thought. The coronavirus lockdown has been a massive and powerful exposure of what is not working about the social structures we have. We have seen the inherent weakness in organizing our production of goods and food in gigantic factories far removed from the consumers of those products. We have seen the fundamental injustice of paying people less than a living wage and not giving them health care. The move away from normal life has illuminated what really does not work, and has motivated a desire for structures that are more conducive to human dignity.

But how do we pursue a path of

constructive social change? How do we even recognize the direction that path would take? The question of seeing, of perceiving what is possible, is not simple, and part of our story as Americans and citizens of the world is that we have often made mistakes in the vision part of social change. To think about this, I will start with an analogy, make some observations about the elements of building new social structures, and then use examples from moments in African American history in the United States to explore how constructive social change involves a systematic cultivation of vision.

Social transformation is a process of clearing away the old and building the new, and both have to happen. It is easy to see this reality if we use an analogy. A sturdy house cannot be built on top of a house that already exists. If a family wants more space in their home, they will have to live with the mess of taking the old walls down. The room is not going to get bigger until they knock down the old walls. It is going to be dusty, and there is going to be a mess, and a lot of old construction material will pile up outside before it gets carried off to a landfill, but the family accepts the effort and the expense and the discomfort because they cannot have the better house, with the bigger windows and the larger space for children, unless they take down the old one. If some family members insist on a remodel that keeps the old house intact, without disturbing anything and without making a mess, not much is going to change.

¹ This paper is based on a talk given on June 19, 2020, to an audience in the United States.

It is the same thing with society: if we want more room, more justice, and a better flow of resources, we cannot create new structures with social structures that hold injustice firmly in place. Perhaps they will fall apart on their own, perhaps they will collapse in a fight about their utility, but the structures that are not working will have to go. It is like the house, we cannot put new, more just and equitable social structures in a space occupied by other social structures. They need space. Taking down and building up are both essential processes for social change.

Strategies of constructive resilience enable people to overcome a fundamental challenge of trying to build social structures characterized by justice, which is that we cannot know where we are going as we begin. When people are building or remodeling a house, they have a plan. When the family starts to take down the old walls to make the children's bedroom bigger, they know what the next step will be. The old wall comes down, the foundation gets extended or whatever needs to be done, and then the family follows a plan to put up new walls in a new place. They know where they are going. It is harder to have a plan for social transformation. We cannot have plans like architectural drawings because if we live in a society characterized by injustice, we do not really know how to make social institutions that work differently. A failure of imagination is one reason efforts to create a more just society have often failed. It is naturally difficult for people to imagine any way

of organizing society different from what they had before; too often, even well-intentioned efforts end up recreating it. That is what happened with the French Revolution—people set out on a process of figuring out how to have a society without the institutions they knew were oppressive, but they cleared away an old social structure and then built the same one over again. The French Revolution overthrew the king, but France had Napoleon Bonaparte as dictator ten years later. The Russian Revolution did away with the Czar and the nobility that controlled voice and wealth, but Russians' effort at learning how to put society together in a way that was more fair got derailed, and eventually they arrived back at a small elite that controlled voice and wealth. Seeing injustice, and working to be rid of it, was not enough.

Injustice distorts our perception of reality: our understanding of our own capacity as well as our ability to imagine a society with qualities our own does not have. Barbara Fields and Karen Fields describe this phenomenon in relation to the perception of the reality of race in the United States: "The destructive imagination that inflates the racecraft balloon sucks away oxygen from the constructive imagining that we urgently need, and does so to the disadvantage of all working Americans, not just black or white ones" (Fields and Fields 289). The Universal House of Justice observes that diminishing people's self-understanding is an intended consequence of a system of injustice, "deliberate oppression

aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society” (26 Nov. 2003). Therefore, those who are attempting to respond to oppression have to find a way to preserve their sense of themselves as noble beings capable of acting on and changing the world. Constructive resilience is a way of describing efforts at social transformation which sustain a movement towards fundamental change in the face of oppression that seeks to dehumanize.

Systematic learning is one of the strategies that characterizes constructive resilience. We cannot know what just social structures would actually be like, because we have never experienced them. But groups of people thinking together, asking questions, making efforts, and revising their understanding based on experience can move their thought and action away from injustice and toward justice. It takes decades, it takes a cultivation of collective will, and it takes the power of faith, but it is possible. We can set out on a process of social learning with a framework as a way to keep ourselves on track as we are learning.

So how do we set ourselves on a path of learning so we can create a system of community support and protection that keeps everyone safe, and an economy that works for everyone? How do we create the justice which is the foundation of unity? We need, in the words of the Universal House of Justice “a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society”—those between human beings

and nature, between members of the family, between individuals, institutions, and communities, and between parts of the world. (2 Mar. 2013). We have been making the structures that now characterize the world over half a millennium, in a set of long-term, world-embracing patterns of change that includes the European conquest of other parts of the world, the colonial exploitation of Asians, Africans, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, the enslavement of Africans, and the design of industrial factories on the pattern of plantation slave labor. We are organized in relationships, but they do not work, they are unjust, they are dehumanizing. We are stuck inside these structures. We live inside a house of social institutions that was built with violence. It is unbearable, but not surprising, that violence, self-interest, and white supremacy are the frames of our house.

Another fundamental part of the structure is that power rests someplace else in society—it does not rest with us. In the United States and many other societies, many overt and subtle forces state that to be a good citizen is to make a salary, buy things with the money one earns, and vote. Society is shaped somewhere else; problems are solved somewhere else. If there are problems, it is our job to point them out, and to make sure the right people are elected to fix them. This withdrawal of responsibility for society is another part of the house of our ideas that has failed us, and we have to remove that pillar, too. The Universal House of Justice drew

attention to this when it wrote: “every nation and group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving” (2 Mar. 2013). This makes sense, because if what has become disturbed is the way we have relationships with others, a fundamental step will be learning to have different kinds of relationships. We might think that having the responsibility to create relationships which enable a restructuring of society is beyond our capacity. It might seem to be a frightening and overwhelming responsibility. Thinking we are powerless is part of our oppression.

Therefore, an essential part of the process of reconstructing the house of our society, is to take back our sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of the social whole. That is what communities engaged in constructive resilience are doing. To summarize, fundamental social progress requires the abandonment of social structures that are unjust and a systematic effort in which we all learn how to organize ourselves in a way that works better, and that takes a long time. Since the institutions of society that we have were built out of oppression, we have a major remodeling project on our hands. We have to learn new ways of thinking about, and new ways of organizing, all our relationships. Since oppression and injustice are embodied in relationships, and we are all constantly holding in place many kinds of relationships, every human being on earth is part of how we

will make the change. That this change seems too hard results from our being oppressed by materialism, racism, and other negative forces, but the victims of oppression, and that is all of us, can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action. That is constructive resilience.

Recognizing that social transformation requires both clearing away what doesn't work and systematically learning about what could be better helps us see the possibilities of this moment in the United States. It is not enough to know that social conditions are intolerable: to engage in profound, meaningful, permanent social building, there has to be a space for something new to develop, and we have to have a vision and a plan for how we are going to learn to implement it. Although they are perhaps not part of our conscious self-awareness, efforts to create a just, diverse, reciprocal community are part of our history from the earliest interactions of Indigenous communities with newly arrived strangers. This essay focusses on another powerful, inspiring history—also almost entirely neglected and forgotten: constructive, far-seeing society building among African Americans over the past two centuries can help us orient ourselves to the task we face.



At the moment that enslavement ended, African Americans were carefully and deliberately opening up

space for a different set of relationships among people than those they had been experiencing. In a brilliant book on African American ethics, Lynda Morgan tells the story of Mr. Jourdan Anderson. He had moved to Ohio from Tennessee, where he had been enslaved. Four months after the Emancipation Proclamation, he received a letter from his former owner, Mr. P. M. Anderson, asking him and his wife to come back to the farm where he had been enslaved to work for wages. Jourdan Anderson wrote back that his family was doing well. They were attending church, he had a job, and his children were in school. He asked Mr. P.M. Anderson, “can you match these amenities?” He also asked for back wages for the time he had worked for Anderson. He wrote “This will make us forgive and forget old scores and rely on your justice and friendship in the future.” He had been enslaved for 32 years, and his wife had been enslaved for 20 years. Calculating the value of his labor at twenty-five dollars a week, and his wife’s at two dollars a week, but subtracting the value of clothing and one doctor’s and dentist’s visit each year, he informed Anderson that by his reckoning, the total he was owed was \$11,680 (\$233,600 in current dollars) He wrote, “This balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past we can have little faith in your promises in the future. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those that defraud the laborer of their hire” (Anderson, quoted in Morgan, 13–14). Jourdan Anderson

responded to the person who had taken the value of his labor for thirty-two years with an invitation to justice. His courteous letter asserted their mutual humanity and suggested the means to establishing reciprocity. He envisioned, and through his words created, a different kind of relationship.

The origins of the Juneteenth celebration carry the same kind of society-constructing purpose. June 19, 1865 was the day that enslaved people in Texas finally learned that they were free, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. When the Confederate Army had broken up, warlords were controlling Texas, it was lawless, and slave owners were trying to push back the clock, until a Union army regiment landed in Galveston and read a proclamation: “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves” (“Juneteenth”)

In the lawless circumstances in which the people who had held them enslaved continued to try to hold them down, the free Black people of Texas began to celebrate the nineteenth of June as a holiday. People dressed up, they gathered on property of Black landowners, they prayed, they listened to speeches by older people who had memories of enslavement, and they had celebratory meals. They were saying, *We know we are free, we know we have always deserved to be free, we know this is a cause for celebration.*

What we see, in the original Juneteenth celebration, is people responding to oppression with an expression of their profound conviction of the dignity and capacity of human beings, informed by a belief in God. We see formerly enslaved Texans acting in a way that acknowledged the humanity of oppressors and invited oppressors to behave in a way that expressed their human potential for goodness, and we see them making practical, concrete efforts to put into practice a vision of a more just society on every level—economically, socially, intellectually, and spiritually.

A profound, deliberate re-imagining of what the United States could be happened in the decades after the Civil War, a period labeled “Reconstruction.” People were asking, *What kinds of social institutions can replace the ones built on slavery?* Their efforts actually focused on building new forms of political voice and new forms of economic organization. People were experimenting; they were trying to learn. The first free schools in the southern United States were organized by and for freedmen. These were not just the first free schools for African Americans but the first system of public education for anyone in that area. Formerly enslaved people built neighborhoods in which their ownership of homes and businesses asserted a plan for prosperity. Because the most highly skilled laborers in the United States had been enslaved people whose masters had hired them out and taken their wages, these workers moved directly into accumulating property and

wealth. African American communities in those decades were a dense web of spaces for learning, such as debating societies and literary societies with a variety of social purposes.

African American and White craftsmen were also trying to learn how to harness industrial technology to collective generation of wealth. The 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s witnessed very deliberate efforts to create cooperative manufacturing: at least five hundred cooperatives opened in the twenty-five years after the Civil War. There were mines, foundries, mills, and factories making barrels, clothes, shoes, soap, and furniture. There were cooperative laundries, cooperative printers, and cooperative lumberjacks. The Knights of Labor, an organization which had fundamental problems but also admirable goals, at its peak had 800,000 members, was racially integrated, and included women as workers, members, and leaders. The Knights of Labor actually had Black elected leaders, but they did not put those people on their posters of their leaders, because the organization did not want to cause their African American leaders to be lynched. The people involved thought that a widespread economic democracy and a cooperative commonwealth would emerge through their efforts to learn how to work together in a new way, and intense efforts of communities to learn together characterized this period of time (Gordon Nembhard, 48–52).

That effort to learn how to build a new kind of society was deliberately

ended, and the turning back was so successful we have forgotten that it even happened. The so-called “Redemption,” which stopped the innovation and sought to put African Americans back into a space of absolute oppression, was fueled not only by racism, but also by the wealthiest and most powerful element of American society, which feared the power of Black and White laborers joining together. It was absolutely a war on Black people, but it was also a war on working people, and it very deliberately sought to create racial animosity in the White working class. This was the moment that statues honoring Confederate heroes were built. It was also a time of war on cooperatives. John Curl, a historian of cooperation in the United States, writes that, “railroads refused to haul their products, manufacturers refused to sell them needed machinery; wholesalers refused them raw materials and supplies; banks wouldn’t lend” (106).

In the early twentieth century, African American leaders focused on how to build prosperity through cooperation within the confines of Jim Crow segregation laws. W.E.B. Du Bois initiated an annual Negro Businesses and Cooperatives Conference because he saw cooperation as a way of responding to oppression. He framed a vision of social transformation to those gathered at the 1907 conference in Atlanta: “We unwittingly stand at the crossroads—should we go the way of capitalism and try to become individually rich as capitalists, or should we go the way of cooperatives and economic cooperation

where we and our whole community could be rich together?” (qtd. in Gordon Nembhard 260).

We can see a focus on learning in how African American communities established cooperatives. They usually began in churches, and in order to start them, people had to have a study circle, and they had to study for a year together to develop the skills they needed. Many, once they were started, did not succeed, but they still had an effect because their participants had built skills. They existed until the risk of being labelled communists in the McCarthy era made cooperation dangerous.



We all need to know the history which demonstrates we have social structures that need to be removed, and we need to know and value the efforts people have made to take down those structures. In the United States, we need to be aware of the nineteenth-century violence of “Redemption” after Reconstruction and the twentieth-century violence of lynchings and massacres, such as the one in Tulsa, in order to truly grasp the enormity of what has to be remade. It is important to be inspired by the history of the Civil Rights Movement, but that is not enough.

We also need to learn from the efforts people have made to build a different kind of social house. We need to see what people did because their faith in God gave them faith in themselves, because we can learn from them how to do it in the present. Their songs can protect us, their sacrifices can inspire

us, their experiments can inform ours. When we look, we will see Indigenous peoples, landless Nicaraguan farmworkers, Zanzibari women, Iranians denied education, African Americans across the generations, and so many others whose connection to God gave them an alternative understanding of power. We will find well-developed and deliberate forms of community education, initiated by groups who have had a vision of a direction they wanted to move. We will see forms of community economy that have harnessed the power of reciprocity and cooperation to combine collective goals with individual need and effort. We see carefully built, dense webs of social connection on the local level, which have served as a locus for agency and self-expression for people determined to make nobility visible. This is the source of the vision we need to build the social structures we want.

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