

acy programs taught by schools on wheels would use critical pedagogy to teach reading and writing. A team of researchers (not all of whom would be black) would then devise a plan for each household to be educated for critical consciousness in ways that would allow them to gain access to the knowledge and skills necessary to change their circumstances. Drawing on the model of civil rights, and militant black liberation struggle, these efforts at black self-determination would emphasize engaging folks where they are rather than urging them to go out and join a movement that may not clearly reflect their needs (that larger mass organizing can take place only after individual consciousness has been changed and a commitment to radical politics has taken place). Black self-determination need not be a dream. The programs for change sketched here are the ones that those of us who have come from the bottom, who have decolonized our minds, who have gained economic self-sufficiency, have used. We know they work. They changed our lives so that we can live fully and well. That is why we want to share the liberatory power of black self-determination. Our freedom is sweet. It will be sweeter when we are all free.

BELOVED COMMUNITY

A WORLD WITHOUT RACISM

Some days it is just hard to accept that racism can still be such a powerful dominating force in all our lives. When I remember all that black and white folks together have sacrificed to challenge and change white supremacy, when I remember the individuals who gave their lives to the cause of racial justice, my heart is deeply saddened that we have not fulfilled their shared dream of ending racism, of creating a new culture, a place for the *beloved community*. Early on in his work for civil rights, long before his consciousness had been deeply radicalized by resistance to militarism and global Western imperialism, Martin Luther King imagined a *beloved community* where race would be transcended, forgotten, where no one would see skin color. This dream has not been realized. From its inception it was a flawed vision. The flaw, however, was not the imagining of a *beloved community*; it was the insistence that such a community could exist only if we erased and forgot racial difference.

Many citizens of these United States still long to live in a society where *beloved community* can be formed—where

loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences. We cannot surrender that longing—if we do we will never see an end to racism. These days it is an untalked-about longing. Most folks in this society have become so cynical about ending racism, so convinced that solidarity across racial differences can never be a reality, that they make no effort to build community. Those of us who are not cynical, who still cherish the vision of *beloved community*, sustain our conviction that we need such bonding not because we cling to utopian fantasies but because we have struggled all our lives to create this community. In my blackness I have struggled together with white comrades in the segregated South. Sharing that struggle we came to know deeply, intimately, with all our minds and hearts that we can all divest of racism and white supremacy if we so desire. We divest through our commitment to and engagement with anti-racist struggle. Even though that commitment was first made in the mind and heart, it is realized by concrete action, by anti-racist living and being.

Over the years my love and admiration for those black and white southerners in my hometown who worked together to realize racial justice deepens, as does their love of me. We have gone off from that time of legalized segregation to create intimate lives for ourselves that include loving engagement with all races and ethnicities. The small circles of love we have managed to form in our individual lives represent a concrete realistic reminder that *beloved community* is not a dream, that it already exists for those of us who have done the work of educating ourselves for critical consciousness in ways that enabled a letting go of white supremacist assumptions and values. The process of decolonization (unlearning white supremacy by divesting of white privilege if we were white or vestiges of internalized racism if we were black) transformed our minds and our habits of being.

In the segregated South those black and white folks who struggled together for racial justice (many of whom grounded their actions not in radical politics but in religious conviction) were bound by a shared belief in the transformative power of love. Understanding that love was the antithesis of the will to dominate and subjugate, we allowed that longing to know love, to love one another, to radicalize us politically. That love was not sentimental. It did not blind us to the reality that racism was deeply systemic and that only by realizing that love in concrete political actions that might involve sacrifice, even the surrender of one's life, would white supremacy be fundamentally challenged. We knew the sweetness of *beloved community*.

What those of us who have not died now know, that generations before us did not grasp, was that *beloved community* is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world. To form *beloved community* we do not surrender ties to precious origins. We deepen those bondings by connecting them with an anti-racist struggle which is at heart always a movement to disrupt that clinging to cultural legacies that demands investment in notions of racial purity, authenticity, nationalist fundamentalism. The notion that differences of skin color, class background, and cultural heritage must be erased for justice and equality to prevail is a brand of popular false consciousness that helps keep racist thinking and action intact. Most folks are threatened by the notion that they must give up allegiances to specific cultural legacies in order to have harmony. Such suspicion is healthy. Unfortunately, as long as our society holds up a vision of democracy that requires the surrender of bonds and ties to legacies folks hold dear, challenging racism and white supremacy will seem like an action that diminishes and destabilizes.

The misguided idea that one must give cultural allegiance to create harmony positively emerged from religious freedom fighters whose faith urged them to let go attachment to the things of this world (status, ethnicity, national allegiances) in order to be one with God. Negatively, it has been appropriated by the enemies of anti-racist struggle to further tensions between different racial groups, to breed fundamentalist and nationalistic feelings and support for racial separatism. Since the notion that we should all forsake attachment to race and/or cultural identity and be “just humans” within the framework of white supremacy has usually meant that subordinate groups must surrender their identities, beliefs, values and assimilate by adopting the values and beliefs of privileged-class whites, rather than promoting racial harmony this thinking has created a fierce cultural protectionism. That conservative force that sees itself as refusing assimilation expresses itself in the call for cultural nationalism, for disenfranchised groups to embrace separatism. This is why black leaders who espouse black separatism are gaining political power. Many black people fear that white commodification and appropriation of blackness is a neo-colonial strategy of cultural genocide that threatens to destroy our cultural legacy. That fear is not ungrounded. Black people, however, are misguided in thinking that nationalist fundamentalism is the best or only way to either preserve our heritage or to make a meaningful political response to ending racism.

In actuality, the growth of nationalist separatist thinking among black people is an extreme expression of collective cynicism about ending white supremacy. The assumption that white folks will never cease to be racist represents a refusal to privilege the history of those whites (however few) who have been willing to give their lives to the struggle for racial justice over that of white folks who maintain racist thinking—

sometimes without even knowing that they hold racist assumptions. Since white supremacist attitudes and values permeate every aspect of the culture, most white folks are unconsciously absorbing the ideology of white supremacy. Since they do not realize this socialization is taking place, many of them feel that they are not racist. When these feelings are rooted in denial, the first stage of anti-racist struggle has to be breaking that denial. This is one of the primary distinctions between the generation of white folks who were raised in the midst of white supremacist apartheid, who witnessed firsthand the brutal dehumanization of black people and who knew that “racism” permeated the culture, and this contemporary generation that either engages in historical amnesia or does not remember. Prior to desegregation, few whites would have been as arrogantly convinced that they are not racists as are most whites today, some of whom never come into contact with black people. During civil rights struggle, it was commonly understood that whites seeking to live in an anti-racist world measured their progress and their commitment by their interactions with black people. How can a white person assume he or she is not racist if that assumption has not been concretely realized in interaction? It was precisely the astute recognition on the part of freedom fighters working for racial justice that anti-racist habits of being were best cultivated in situations of interaction that was at the heart of every vision of non-racist community.

Concurrently, most white Americans who believed or believe that racism is ethically and morally wrong centered their anti-racist struggle around the desire to commune with black folks. Today many white people who see themselves as non-racist are comfortable with lives where they have no contact with black people or where fear is their first response in any encounter with blackness. This “fear” is the first sign of the

internalization in the white psyche of white supremacist sentiments. It serves to mask white power and privilege. In the past the affirmation of white supremacy in everyday life was declared via assertions of hatred and/or power (i.e., public and private subordination and humiliation of black folks—the white wife who sits at her dining table eating a nice lunch while the maid eats standing in the kitchen, the white male employer paying black workers less and calling them by obscene names); in our contemporary times white belief in black inferiority is most often registered by the assertion of power. Yet that power is often obscured by white focus on fear. The fear whites direct at blacks is rooted in the racist assumption that the darker race is inherently deprived, dangerous, and willing to obtain what they desire by any means necessary. Since it is assumed that whenever fear is present one is less powerful, cultivating in whites fear of blacks is a useful neo-colonial strategy as it obscures thereality that whites do much more harm to blacks daily than vice versa. It also encourages white people to believe that they do not hold power over blacks even as their ability to project fear when there is no danger is an act of denial that indicates their complicity with white supremacist thinking. Those white people who consciously break with racist thinking know that there is no concrete reality to suggest that they should be more fearful of blacks than other people, since white folks, like blacks, are likely to be harmed by people of the same race. Let me give a useful example. When I worked as an assistant professor at an Ivy League university one of my white female students was raped by a black man. Even though she had been deeply committed to anti-racist work before the rape, during her period of recovery she found that she was fearing all black men. Her commitment to anti-racist struggle led her to interrogate that fear, and she real-

ized that had she been raped by a white male, she would not have felt all white males were responsible and should be feared. Seeing her fear of all black males as a regressive expression of white racism, she let it go. The will to be vigilant emerged from both her commitment to ending racism and her will to be in loving community with black folks. Not abandoning that longing for community is a perspective we must all embrace if racism is to end.

More than ever before in our history, black Americans are succumbing to and internalizing the racist assumption that there can be no meaningful bonds of intimacy between blacks and whites. It is fascinating to explore why it is that black people trapped in the worst situation of racial oppression—enslavement—had the foresight to see that it would be disempowering for them to lose sight of the capacity of white people to transform themselves and divest of white supremacy, even as many black folks today who in no way suffer such extreme racist oppression and exploitation are convinced that white people will not repudiate racism. Contemporary black folks, like their white counterparts, have passively accepted the internalization of white supremacist assumptions. Organized white supremacists have always taught that there can never be trust and intimacy between the superior white race and the inferior black race. When black people internalize these sentiments, no resistance to white supremacy is taking place; rather we become complicit in spreading racist notions. It does not matter that so many black people feel white people will never repudiate racism because of being daily assaulted by white denial and refusal of accountability. We must not allow the actions of white folks who blindly endorse racism to determine the direction of our resistance. Like our white allies in struggle we must consistently keep the faith, by always sharing the truth that

white people can be anti-racist, that racism is not some immutable character flaw.

Of course many white people are comfortable with a rhetoric of race that suggests racism cannot be changed, that all white people are “inherently racist” simply because they are born and raised in this society. Such misguided thinking socializes white people both to remain ignorant of the way in which white supremacist attitudes are learned and to assume a posture of learned helplessness as though they have no agency—no capacity to resist this thinking. Luckily we have many autobiographies by white folks committed to anti-racist struggle that provide documentary testimony that many of these individuals repudiated racism when they were children. Far from passively accepting it as inherent, they instinctively felt it was wrong. Many of them witnessed bizarre acts of white racist aggression towards black folks in everyday life and responded to the injustice of the situation. Sadly, in our times so many white folks are easily convinced by racist whites and black folks who have internalized racism that they can never be really free of racism.

These feelings also then obscure the reality of white privilege. As long as white folks are taught to accept racism as “natural” then they do not have to see themselves as consciously creating a racist society by their actions, by their political choices. This means as well that they do not have to face the way in which acting in a racist manner ensures the maintenance of white privilege. Indeed, denying their agency allows them to believe white privilege does not exist even as they daily exercise it. If the young white woman who had been raped had chosen to hold all black males accountable for what happened, she would have been exercising white privilege and reinforcing the structure of racist thought which teaches that all black people are alike. Unfortunately,

so many white people are eager to believe racism cannot be changed because internalizing that assumption downplays the issue of accountability. No responsibility need be taken for not changing something if it is perceived as immutable. To accept racism as a system of domination that can be changed would demand that everyone who sees him- or herself as embracing a vision of racial social equality would be required to assert anti-racist habits of being. We know from histories both present and past that white people (and everyone else) who commit themselves to living in anti-racist ways need to make sacrifices, to courageously endure the uncomfortable to challenge and change.

Whites, people of color, and black folks are reluctant to commit themselves fully and deeply to an anti-racist struggle that is ongoing because there is such a pervasive feeling of hopelessness—a conviction that nothing will ever change. How any of us can continue to hold those feelings when we study the history of racism in this society and see how much has changed makes no logical sense. Clearly we have not gone far enough. In the late sixties, Martin Luther King posed the question “Where do we go from here.” To live in anti-racist society we must collectively renew our commitment to a democratic vision of racial justice and equality. Pursuing that vision we create a culture where beloved community flourishes and is sustained. Those of us who know the joy of being with folks from all walks of life, all races, who are fundamentally anti-racist in their habits of being, need to give public testimony. We need to share not only what we have experienced but the conditions of change that make such an experience possible. The interracial circle of love that I know can happen because each individual present in it has made his or her own commitment to living an anti-racist life and to furthering the struggle to end white suprem-

acy will become a reality for everyone only if those of us who have created these communities share how they emerge in our lives and the strategies we use to sustain them. Our devout commitment to building diverse communities is central. These commitments to anti-racist living are just one expression of who we are and what we share with one another but they form the foundation of that sharing. Like all beloved communities we affirm our differences. It is this generous spirit of affirmation that gives us the courage to challenge one another, to work through misunderstandings, especially those that have to do with race and racism. In a beloved community solidarity and trust are grounded in profound commitment to a shared vision. Those of us who are always anti-racist long for a world in which everyone can form a beloved community where borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated. Anyone can begin to make such a community by truly seeking to live in an anti-racist world. If that longing guides our vision and our actions, the new culture will be born and anti-racist communities of resistance will emerge everywhere. That is where we must go from here.

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