



Nurturing Freedom Dreams Through A Principled Struggle

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It's been said that freedom arrives "when we are no longer afraid." What if we struggled without fear? What if we heeded lessons from historical truths? What if we believed that the way we damage people impairs and destroys the collective us? What if the invention of race didn't dictate who we deem deserving and capable? Dammit, this brings more questions, right? For depth and texture, let us try this frame: We believe that you know the immense harm caused by our interconnected human services institutions (because you are, or have been complicit in causing them). And that you are ready with all the earnestness at our command to be fearless and thorough. Ready to mount new ideas, solutions, resources and thinking that equal the magnitude of the harm. This belief connotes that we have grown a mutual understanding of our duty and have collectively embodied compassion and empathy for the "other." Ready to be bravely on our way to becoming a society that measures its worth based on a sense of justice, liberation, and belonging. Rather than reducing people to widgets and thrusting them into programmatic categories associated with a prejudiced degree of risk. Frederick Douglass taught us; "Power conceded nothing without a demand."

MFG's Parent Knowledge Curators (PKC's) are not naïve or Pollyannaish to think that by simply demanding that our systems stop subjecting families to structural violence, that it will happen. Hence, the reason why we must continue writing this piece, while approaching old struggles in rooted, truthful ways. For our preparation, we gathered through Zoom and asked ourselves a few questions: What are families in our networks saying about glimpsing justice in their interactions with punitive systems? Do we believe that punitive systems are actively focused on connection and belonging? And why does the designed menu for "systems change" seem to include the familiar ingredients that produced a racially capitalistic, exploitative, carceral, and colonized society!? To go further into dreaming, we decided to imagine that we were making that demand. And therefore, we asked ourselves, what would that mandate be? *The demand is for you to STOP the oppressive practices!* Can it be that simple for our systems to actively empathize with what the most impacted have experienced? If it were, the article would end here. And our conference dinners would be filled with revolutionary discourse.

Many dreams have been deferred because of racism. History teaches us that Race + Prejudice (baked-in anti-Blackness; anti-other) + Abusive Power = Racism. And it is even more confusing to know that racism predates race. Sheesh! As with many recipes, (ideologies), there are several ways to adjust the flavor while they maintain the intended impact. Afterall, racism and white supremacy is what we all have consumed. And to some degree, we reproduce the ideas that drive policy, behaviors, and outcomes. And many of us are actively inoculating the residual effects, lingering taste, prolonged sickness, and contagiousness of the



dominant ideology and framing. The thing about upholding a system that advantages white and white adjacent bodies is that, unlike a cook in the back-of-the-house, you don't need a "safe food handlers" certification, Michelin star rating, or "Hell's Kitchen" popularity. In fact, you don't even need to know how to cook.

We are born with the transferrable skills and abilities to other, to punish, to lock up, to dismiss, to dehumanize and to be racist. Even when we think we're not. Like any "good cook" who follows the Chef's recipe, we have become completely willful and short-sighted about the fact that what we are pushing out of kitchen is potentially causing very REAL, very deep, oppressive harm to our collective bodies. Similarly, to the cook, you have a job. For the cook, that job is to get food in the window and get it up there fast. That is the outcome! See, the cook realizes if they follow the recipe or formula to specifications, the chances of consumer complaints are minimized. And when the consumer does complain, the cook doesn't have to deal with it head on. There's a crew lead, a manager, and let us not forget about the server. Typically, in these cases, the complaints are about timeliness or more overt mistakes that cooks make. Consumers don't usually complain if the garnish was positioned at eleven o'clock instead of two. Or if the dish isn't plated as advertised in photos on the website. This may generate an emotional reaction that feels confusing, and the consumer may begin to internalize the effects of the environment. We've all said or heard: "I don't want to be that consumer;" "I'll just eat it;" "Maybe I forgot to remind the server." The list of excuses we make to justify the harm being caused to our bodies IS a part of that sickness. Similar to being the subject of slick- ass racism, the consumer will take notice at the table with their close, mono-cultural group when something seems to feel or be a bit "off." To unravel this analogy, the cook is completely removed from the consumer. The consumer trusts the cook to push out a palatable product. And the cook is following the design that has been shaped and created by the owners of the restaurant. And the Chef is both the gatekeeper and expeditor. Getting it now?

For vivid clarity, the formula *MFG* embraces for racism has robbed us of the ability to consciously notice, with precision, that what we consume has been a slow drip toward severing our ability to embrace our full humanity. This slow drip impedes our personal and collective aptitudes to become maturely brave in the relationships that we have with ourselves and other bodies. One of the biggest costs associated with consuming white supremacy and racism is the assault on our relationships with one another. This cost is one we continue to pay in our work to advance "outcomes" for people. Especially, when we are devaluing their humanity and choose not to be brave because of self-interest or our oblivious dependence on a set of false narratives that maintain our ways of life. The cost of justice and freedom is quite high. One way of understanding what that cost might be for you is to simply ask yourself: "What has racism cost me?" Grappling with what was stolen, stripped, and shattered may serve you with the much-needed fortitude to fully hustle harder in reclaiming your humanity. To become equipped in pulling from the best of who you are. This inside job will require courage in the face of resistance; right and accountable relationships and challenging your core assumptions about who you are and what you exist to become. Ibram X. Kendi reminds us; "A coward is someone who recognizes the danger in doing what's right and therefore doesn't do it."



Proximity + Right Relationships + Vulnerability = Belonging

We invite you to embrace JUSTICE as an acknowledgement of one's humanness. Proactively pursuing healing systemic harm, while repairing fractured relationships from the past, equity of voice and personhood. Moving with this recognition and awareness so that people are seen and able to contribute to positive social impact. Justice is supporting one another to build trust and empathy through holding ourselves accountable to embodied (not declared) anti-racism. LIBERATION is defined as freedom from oppression and restrictions to creating a life that is unique to one's individual wants and needs. While embracing the needs of other bodies. Having the fortitude to be truthful with experiences that grow and nurture solidarity. And BELONGING is being accepted and values for our authentic selves as part of a larger community—our humanity matters in all spaces.

MFG strategizes with history. Meaning, that the past shapes our present. The past is happenING to us all. And in the present, we can dream and imagine what a more just future will look like. We acknowledge areas of our lives where we have played the coward. Where fear gripped us up, shook us to the core. We can dream accountability. What if we embraced accountability as a reflection of our undeniable incredible tender humanity? We see the environments in which we attempted to shape-shift actually prevented us from pulling from our best selves. Either way, we know that proximity alone will not lead to justice and belonging. In our work, we have a proclivity to gravitate toward the easy and/or the known. As an example, we tend to amplify the need for more "diversity." Depending on your frame, this may mean many things. Let us be reminded that the plantation was one of the most racially diverse environments we have ever seen. We've come a long way from Victor H. Green's "*The Negro Motorist Green Book*." The most recent edition of that publication was released in 1963. Or have we?

Our work environments have lots of diversity: inclusive of race, ethnicity, orientation, and other subjugated identities. We fail miserably at cultivating a culture of justice, liberation, and a sense of belonging. If we leverage diversity as a goal/quota, what exactly are we diversifying from? The answer to this question has already been given. That would mean that we are clear about moving from a mono-cultural existence to a multi-cultural identity. Getting the right frame helps us understand where to go to find areas of elasticity and discretion. If our vision remains cloudy, diversity will continue show up as tokensim, taco Tuesday, collard green Thursday and rainbow flag Friday. None of this is sufficient to do what is just and pure for families. Afterall, DEI is where anti-racism and justice goes to DIE.

To challenge us to be BIG, and then become even BIGGER in our quest to think culturally versus strategically, we will walk you through a nuanced way of understanding what the principled struggle for "justice doing" looks like in public. It looks like love! The body of work that Bryan Stevenson has accomplished through the *Equal Justice Initiative* (EJI) is what nurturing freedom dreams can look like for us. As you recall *Just Mercy*, consider what it took for one human who visits and represents predominantly Black bodies being held captive, on death row, to embody the core belief "that we are not the worse thing we've ever done." Pause and try and think about the group or groups of people you like the least. Are you able to see their humanness in yourself? Stevenson also believed that we had to get proximate to people



to value and honor the gold within human beings. Well, proximity is not the end of the journey. Despite the fact that we live racially segregated lives, we get close to people who have all types of differences.

Some of us invite parents, youth, and community members to our meetings. Some of them even get to lead conversations. Many parents who have been ravaged by the family policing system have been physically close to us. Researchers have extracted information and written tons of articles about minoritized groups of people. All because they have gotten proximate. But what has changed as a result? More voyeurism, spectating and charity? If we believe that being in the vicinity of human “difference” is the standard, our thinking is myopic at best. Going back to *Just Mercy* and *EJI*, we witnessed an age-old formula at work. A formula that accelerated a sense of belonging with the downtrodden, the disappeared, the “less deserving.”

What we learn from Bryan Stevenson and his leadership, is that it is less about “how” to make impact and more about “where” to make impact. We witness his ability to mine for gold; sometimes having to sift through pounds of dirt to find that one ounce of gold. To intentionally give up parts of his existing ideology so that he was able to be an active participant in right and accountable relationships. This requires deep vulnerability and bravery. On the one hand, he had to trust himself enough to be seen by another human. On the other, he had to trust himself enough to see another body in their humanness and not flinch. The formula that *MFG* uses with community members, parents, and systems leaders is the same: *Proximity + Right Relationships + Vulnerability = Belonging*. In our work, we build culture around these non-negotiable elements. They have become what we use to inoculate white body supremacy. Because just getting close isn’t enough. In order to do more with families, we have to be willing to bend ourselves in new and often awkward ways. This should happen at every decision point and at every meeting. Putting the reps in for a glimpse of this level of liberation is what got us to legal humanity for Black bodies in 1964.

Collectivism is a non-linear and emergent strategy. There is no script. It is where orientations are rocked to a fourth dimension. We can’t put a timeline. It is where we experience life forward yet understand it backwards. The rigid confines don’t exist. It is the process of holding weight and charges to hold change. Listening, reflecting, noticing, pausing, truth-telling, and growing the way forward to extract the essence of who we are becoming. Embracing the messiness. Explore a deeper understanding of what we are saying YES to. That helps us to know what to say no to. And this...this is how we nurture freedom dreams. A simpler way to better impact: STOP causing harm and struggle with the people for real change!