

## **Revolutionary Love for Building Beloved Community**

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Poet Amanda Gorman closed her stunning Inauguration poem, “The Hill We Climb,” with the lines: “For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

As we consider Dr. King’s vision of Beloved Community today, I wonder what it would be like to paraphrase Gorman’s conclusion slightly, as follows: “For there is always love, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

What does it take to see love? To be love? How do we get brave enough? How do we build the resilience, power, and capacity to co-create the Beloved Community as a world of justice and joy, generosity and gratitude? We sing of building a new way. What does that look like? What does it demand of us? How do we prepare?

Today, I’d like to consider two types of answers. First, I’ll discuss the roles of discomfort, humility, vulnerability, and sacrifice in revolutionary love. Then, I’ll reflect on some spiritual practices that can help us engage with discomfort, humility, vulnerability, and sacrifice. I was inspired to take this approach after reading Rev. Julia’s wonderful column in this month’s newsletter, which I hope you will all read if you have not read it yet.

Valentine’s Day is often a day of adorable cards and silly pop music love songs aimed at actual teenagers and at the teenager in all of us. But today, we’re talking about revolutionary love, the love that transforms powerful systems of injustice. Revolutionary love got Dr. King martyred; it also got the original St. Valentine, for whom Valentine’s Day is named, martyred. Valentine appears to have been executed in part because he performed wedding ceremonies for members of a despised minority who were not legally allowed to marry - not same-sex couples or interracial couples but Christians back before Christianity gained political power. Valentine answered the call of love and paid with his life. Same with Dr. King, who answered the call of justice, which is what love looks like in public.

Revolutionary love is risky and demanding. It invites us to focus less on ourselves and more on our connections with others. It does not ignore the importance of rights but calls us to prioritize right relationships. Revolutionary love moves us from a consumer mentality to a service mentality. Instead of asking what’s in it for me, we are called to ask how we can care for others and give our best to a world aching in need of our gifts.

Revolutionary love comes in many forms. I recognize that not everyone in the room is white but these thoughts are directed particularly to those of you who are white. I speak as a white person living in a white supremacist society who benefits daily from my whiteness. We who are white have the luxury of not focusing much on racism because most of its harms don’t harm us. We can follow the path of least resistance and just get on with our lives. But when we do that, we let white supremacy keep scarring souls, causing pain, and killing people.

What then is the work of white people in the context of white supremacy? How can white people use revolutionary love to struggle against racism? Here are four answers. We can become comfortable with discomfort. We can practice humility. We can be vulnerable without becoming fragile and defensive. And we can make sacrifices in our daily lives so that others might flourish.

Becoming comfortable with discomfort is, in my experience, the first step in acknowledging the reality and horror of white supremacy as a white person. It also undergirds all the other work. To acknowledge how much we white people benefit, physically, materially and psychologically, from racism is painful. To grasp that we can be decent, well-intentioned people and still reproduce racism in our day-to-day lives can feel devastating. To decenter ourselves and our agendas and focus on the insights and demands of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities, which I'll refer to as BIPOC communities, is, for many of us, extremely difficult. Even the self-education that we do about the history and present reality of white supremacy can push our buttons, sending us into guilt, defensiveness, resentment and immobilization. We won't be part of the solution until we can sit with how uncomfortable we are about the problem, holding space for whatever emotions arise, forgiving ourselves over and over, and then going and doing the hard work.

I remember vividly a time I got called out for responding insensitively to a Facebook post about yet another horrific racist act of violence. The specifics don't matter, but I recall going through every possible variant of defensiveness and resentment in about thirty seconds. I stewed about the experience for weeks. Eventually, I was able to own my discomfort, acknowledge the truth of what the person confronting me had said, and commit to doing better. The memory still hurts, but I have not made that particular mistake again. And each new mistake I've made, I've been faster to own up to and better able to move forward.

Which leads me to the practice of humility. Humility reminds me that I have a piece of the answer at best. Humility invites me to learn from others, especially the people and communities most negatively affected by white supremacy. Humility whispers that my tendency to be a know-it-all is more of a problem than a blessing. Humility asks me to speak less than I would prefer so that others can speak more. When I'm in a humbler mindset, I focus more on connection and less on self-absorption. I'm more committed to right relations and less obsessed with my personal rights. I'm more inclined to serve others than to consume mindlessly. Not that I'm very good with humility. All of you who know me personally know I'm really not. But I'm working on it, day by day.

In her book *White Fragility*, Dr. Robin DiAngelo contrasts white fragility with white resilience, something white people definitely need in order to work against racism. White fragility could also be contrasted with white vulnerability, which I think of as the willingness to be open-hearted, fully emotionally present, and honest about the harms of white supremacy, especially to BIPOC communities but also to the wholeness and humanity of white people. White fragility is a way to shut down conversations about racism, a way to refuse to be held accountable, just another example of white privilege at work. White vulnerability as I'm defining it would occur primarily in spaces where white people gather alone to learn about and commit to work against racism. White vulnerability would welcome accountability without denying pain, would not shut

down the learning process even at its hardest, and would in fact play an important role in white healing.

Ultimately, white supremacy is not going anywhere without white people making individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional sacrifices. To achieve racial justice and a world in which all lives actually matter and all people can flourish, white people will need to share much of what we have taken for granted as ours to control, such as institutional and cultural power and economic resources. We must jettison assumptions that equate whiteness with competence, trustworthiness, morality, and intelligence and darker skin with their opposites. These assumptions about who merits good-faith treatment have benefited white people and harmed members of BIPOC communities for generations; giving them up will entail some loss on our parts. And that's before we even start talking about reparations.

This all sounds like a lot of very hard work. And it is and will continue to be. Revolutionary love is demanding. How do we ready ourselves for the work? Before I answer that question, we'll listen to a recent hymn of mine, *Rebuilding Starts with Weeping*, to the tune of Bach's *Passion Chorale*. The text will be in the chat, so please feel free to sing along.

[Video of *Rebuilding Starts with Weeping*]

I wrote the text of the hymn you just heard immediately after Biden and Harris won the election, but I think it also speaks to the situation of white people who want to work against white supremacy. We need time and space to grieve the harm that racism has caused and continues to cause, the lives lost, the gifts wasted. We must dare to have hope and we must orient ourselves toward the willingness to embody that hope in our actions. And then we must act with revolutionary love.

White people who want to strengthen their spirits to more effectively work against racism can do so in many ways. Today, I want to mention three areas of practice: silence, listening, and speaking.

Spending time in silence is a wonderful way to get more comfortable with discomfort and to learn to sit with the cacophony of thoughts and feelings that arise when we stop distracting ourselves. In silence, we get to lay aside everything we know, or think we know, in order to become receptive to what we might learn. In silence, our fancy words and expertise and opinions don't matter. If we spend enough time with silence, we might become more resilient, more patient, and humbler, all strengths for any kind of work against white supremacy.

Silence also plays an important role in our capacity to grieve well, an important early step in acknowledging the impact of white supremacy. We cannot be open to the vulnerability of mourning while our minds are going full-tilt, and we cannot recognize the pain of loss if we are not emotionally present to experience the loss. True silence allows us to be present to whatever is true for us, including joy, rage, and sorrow. And when it comes to white supremacy, there is what can feel like an unending ocean of sorrow: sorrow for every individual from BIPOC communities who has been mistrusted, mistreated, harmed, killed. Sorrow for all the joy and creativity and love that could have been but that was instead cut short. Sorrow for all of the gifts

that our world has lost because of how often only the gifts of white people have been recognized and honored. Sorrow for the dehumanization that white people also bear under white supremacy. If rebuilding starts with weeping, weeping often starts with silence.

Listening can also take place in silence. But here, when I mention listening, I mean specifically white people listening to members of BIPOC communities about their experiences with and insights about white supremacy. This listening can happen in a conversation, or while reading a book or blog or watching a TV show or a movie. In these contexts, listening as a spiritual practice means decentering our own experiences and opinions. It means letting go of our defensiveness and resistance to what we hear or read or see. It means treating the speaker or author respectfully as a person of inherent worth and dignity who, too often, has been treated as though they had neither dignity nor worth. This listening is some of the hardest work I've ever done and I don't always do it well. But practice helps. Practice and, again, humility.

Once it is time for white people to speak, how shall we speak? What shall we say? Here, I come back to discomfort, humility, vulnerability, and sacrifice.

When we encounter words and actions that prop up white supremacy and harm members of BIPOC communities, we can name what we see, speaking the truth of how white supremacy is at work in that moment. If we name racism when we see it in action, we will make ourselves and others uncomfortable and we will interrupt the racist path of least resistance that keeps white supremacy in place.

When we are interacting with members of BIPOC communities, we can let humility shape our speech, knowing that nothing in our experiences enables us to understand what it is like to be, for example, African American in a white supremacist society. When we are interacting with other white people who want to work against racism, we can let vulnerability shape our speech, bringing our truest selves to the interaction so that we can support one another even as we hold one another accountable.

How can we make sacrifice a principle of speech? It might mean that we exercise care in what we say, or that we speak less so that others can speak more.

It also might mean that our speech includes discussion of concrete sacrifices we can make in order to support the movement against white supremacy. We can learn about, and then talk about, specific ways we benefit from white supremacy on a daily basis and how we can use those benefits in the service of racial justice. We can learn about, and then talk about, racial justice organizations that would benefit from our time, money, and energy. We can learn about, and then talk about, investing directly in BIPOC communities by shopping at stores owned by members of those communities or buying their products online. We can learn about, and then talk about, how to make our communities and the organizations we belong to more racially just. We can learn about, and then talk about, racial reparations.

Silence, listening, and speaking are spiritual practices of revolutionary love. They deepen us. They exercise our moral muscles. They make us more resilient, more comfortable with

discomfort, humbler. They may enable us to become more vulnerable in settings where such vulnerability is healing. They certainly equip us to better make certain kinds of sacrifices.

None of this work is easy. But if we want to contribute to building Beloved Community, it is our work to do.

I want us to do a small piece of this work together now, inspired by my confessional psalm “Oh, My Shepherd,” which you heard during the Offertory. UU worship services do not commonly include litanies of confession but after yesterday’s impeachment vote, a little extra soul-searching might be in order, a time to be vulnerable together. After each point of confession, I invite you to join me in responding with the phrase, “Revolutionary love invites us to heal the world and build Beloved Community.” Please stay muted during this section.

Oh, my people: We confess to each other and to all that we hold sacred that we have often been too comfortable, too content with communities that are not the Beloved Community.

Response: Revolutionary love invites us to heal the world and build Beloved Community.

Oh, my people: We confess that our society has not prioritized justice, kindness, compassion and love. We confess that we have much work to do in the struggle against injustice, cruelty, violence, and the stoking of hatred and fear.

Response: Revolutionary love invites us to heal the world and build Beloved Community.

Oh, my people: We confess that we have too often focused on taking care of ourselves and those we love rather than making sure that the most marginalized among us have what they need.

Response: Revolutionary love invites us to heal the world and build Beloved Community.

Oh, my people: We confess that we have not demanded of our political leaders that they put right relationships, justice, and human flourishing for all above their own desires for power. We confess that we have not held these leaders accountable or expected them to bring their best moral selves to their work.

Response: Revolutionary love invites us to heal the world and build Beloved Community.

Oh, my people: We confess that we are exhausted and afraid, unsure of what we have to bring to the work ahead.

Final response: Revolutionary love invites us to bring our gifts, energy, passion, and resources to heal the world and build Beloved Community. Revolutionary love will be our guide and our comfort now and always.

Love will indeed guide us, my friends. Revolutionary love will guide us and gather us up and hold us and teach us and make demands on us. May we invite revolutionary love to do its work

in us so that our lives are a testament to that love and to its capacity for healing and building up and making the world new. Amen and blessed be.

Please join me now in our closing song, number 131 in the grey hymnal, “Love Will Guide Us.”