

Radical Work In A Human Body: How Can We Thrive While We Disrupt?

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“Paying attention to ourselves is not avoiding, stalling, or postponing the work; it is the work... In fact, it is by doing so that we begin disrupting white supremacy... We matter, deeply, because our creativity and ability to imagine new ways of existing emerge from our deepest wellbeing.”

Diversity and equity work is *hard*, as anyone leading and participating in social justice advocacy programs and organizations can attest to. And I don't mean simply intellectually strenuous, I mean physically and emotionally exhausting. First, the work is most often championed by those who are painfully aware of what it feels like to live within the confines of white supremacist ideology (which gives fully human status, and therefore unquestioned priority access to resources, only to white, cis-gender, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, males).

Second, regardless of whether we enter overtly hostile environments or settings where good intentions abound, resistance to change is relentless. And how could it not be? No matter the specific context or cause, our work implies confronting the innumerable, ever changing, constantly adapting ways in which white supremacy continues to operate in our everyday lives with seamless ease—in both public and private domains. It is all the more painful and disheartening when resistance emerges within places or relationships we thought of as safe and supportive, and into which we poured our hearts and souls. Over time, we find ourselves surviving, more than thriving; crawling, more than skipping, to the end of each week. The very work that starts as an act of love can become utterly joyless.

This is what happens when we ask ourselves, and each other, to leave our bodies behind and give ourselves “selflessly” to “the cause”. Before we know it, there is indeed no “self” left to walk the very path that called to us. Some still persevere through clenched teeth, others become cynical and jaded or even physically ill, and others search for greener pastures with mixed success. Most of us cycle through all three options. To go all out, all the time, everywhere, and often alone or lonely, doesn't lead to radical change, it leads to exhaustion.

Contrary to a work ethics centered on relentless “productivity”, which permeates activists circles just as much as the mainstream, the key to *both* sustainability and radical change is the practice of turning our attention *back* to our human body, placing its care front and central in the work we do each day. By doing so we begin disrupting white supremacist ideology, which is all too happy to feed off our exhaustion and sense of isolation, our hopelessness and reactivity.

When we are not allowed to meet our bodies' needs, we are cut off from our main source of energy, wisdom, effectiveness, joy, love, and liberation. Courage, hope, and determination carry us forward on the path for social change; yet none of these are available to us when we are physically and emotionally depleted. White supremacist ideology *needs* us to remain hypervigilant and reactive, separated and in hate. It thrives on wearing us down because this is how it undermines our very source of life and resistance, how it most easily enlists our compliance. It cannot function otherwise.

If we are to inspire others to join us on our path, we can't continue to idealize mythological activists who keep on going happily and successfully with minimal sleep or emotional sustenance (and these are mythological beings indeed; our tendency to compare our "insides" to others' "outsides" may even compel us to appear as one of them!). So here are two secrets to both resistance and wellbeing: [breathe](#) and [love](#). This is not wishful thinking, it's literally [how we are made](#).

While the immense power of "breathing" and "loving" is undeniable, for some of us getting there is not a simple, straightforward path. It's critical that we be able to distinguish between healing time, resilience-building time, and rest time; between when and how we need to recover from current, past, or intergenerational hurts, and when we need to intensify our training to fortify our resilience.

To be sure, paying attention to ourselves is *not* avoiding, stalling, or postponing the work; it *is* the work. I once thought that catering to our bodies was vital just from a psychological and physiological perspective. I recently heard Zen priest and activist [Rev. angel Kyodo williams](#) describe inner liberation as essential to envisioning true social change, change that doesn't simply reproduce the rules of white supremacy, but rather reimagines *new* rules altogether.

No one can tell you what "liberation" or "doing the right thing" is for you, your cause, your context. What we need is a way to find our own answers based on our deepest truths. It's your ability to listen, tap into and connect with your whole self that allows you to thrive while disrupting. *We* matter, deeply, because our creativity and ability to imagine new ways of existing emerge from our deepest wellbeing.