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The Cycle of Liberation

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As people come to a critical level of understanding of the nature of oppression and their roles in this systemic phenomenon, they seek new paths for creating social change and taking themselves toward empowerment or liberation. In my years as a social justice educator, it became increasingly clear that most socially conscious people truly want to "do something about" the injustices that they see and they recognize that simple, personal level changes are not enough. They want to know how to make system-level change manageable and within their grasp, and they often become frustrated since so little has been written about the process of liberation.

As more students asked, "How do we make a dent in this thing that *seems so big?*" I began to think about how we might consciously transform the Cycle of Socialization (see chapter 2 of this volume). The cycle "teaches" us how to play our roles in oppression, and how to revere the existing systems that shape our thinking, leading us to blame uncontrollable forces, other people, or ourselves for the existence of oppression. If there is an identifiable pattern of events that repeats itself, becomes self-fulfilling, and leads us to a state of unconsciousness about issues of oppression, then there may be another identifiable pattern of events that leads us toward liberation from that thinking. I began to read about and study efforts to eliminate oppression on a systemic level, and discovered that indeed, some paths were successful at actually creating the kind of lasting change that addressed the root causes of the oppression, and people's roles in it, while other paths were not. These paths were not always the same, and certainly were not linear, but they had in common the same cycle-like traits that characterized the socialization process that teaches us our roles in oppression. There were certain skills and processes, certain ways of thinking and acting in the world, certain seemingly necessary ingredients that were present in every successful liberation effort.

I am defining *liberation* as "critical transformation," in the language and thinking of Paulo Freire (1968). By this I mean that one must "name the problem" in terms of *systemic* assumptions, structures, rules, or roles that are flawed. Significant social change cannot happen until we are thinking on a systemic level. Many people who want to overcome oppression do not start in the critical transforming stage, but as they proceed in their efforts, it becomes necessary for them to move to that level for success.

The following model describes patterns of events common to successful liberation efforts. Its purpose is to organize and name a process that may otherwise be elusive, with the goal of helping people to find their pathway to liberation. It could be characterized as a map of changing terrain where not everyone goes in the same direction or to the same destination or at the same speed, so it should be taken not as a "how to," but rather as a description of what has worked for some.

Cycle of Liberation

Intrapersonal
Change within the Self of People about What They Believe about Themselves

Waking Up
Critical Incident That Creates Cognitive Dissonance

Reaching Out
Movement Out of Self Toward Others
Seeking Experience and Exposure
Speaking Out and Naming Injustices
Taking Stands,   Using Tools
Exploring and Experimenting

Interpersonal
Change in How We Relate to Others and See the World

Getting Ready
Empowerment of Self
Introspection
Education
Consciousness Raising

Gaining
Inspiration
Authenticity

Dismantling
Collusion
Privilege
Internalized
Oppression

Developing
Analysis and Tools

Building Community
Working With Others
A. People "Like Us" for Support
B. People "Different from Us"
for Building Coalitions,
Questioning Assumptions,
Rules, Roles, and Structures
of Systems

Core
Self-Love
Self-Esteem
Balance
Joy
Support
Security
Spiritual Base

Coalescing
Organizing,
Action Planning,
Lobbying,
Fund Raising
Educating,
Renaming Reality
Refusing to Collude
or Take Privilege
Being a Role Model,
an Ally
Transforming Anger
Moving into Action

Maintaining
Integrating
Spreading Hope
and Inspiration
Living Our Dreams
Modeling Authenticity,
Integrity and Wholeness
Taking Care of Self
and Others

Creating Change
Critically Transforming
Institutions and
Creating New Culture
Influencing: Policy
Assumptions
Structures
Definitions, Rules
Taking Leadership
Risks
Guiding Change
Healing
"Power Shared"

Systemic
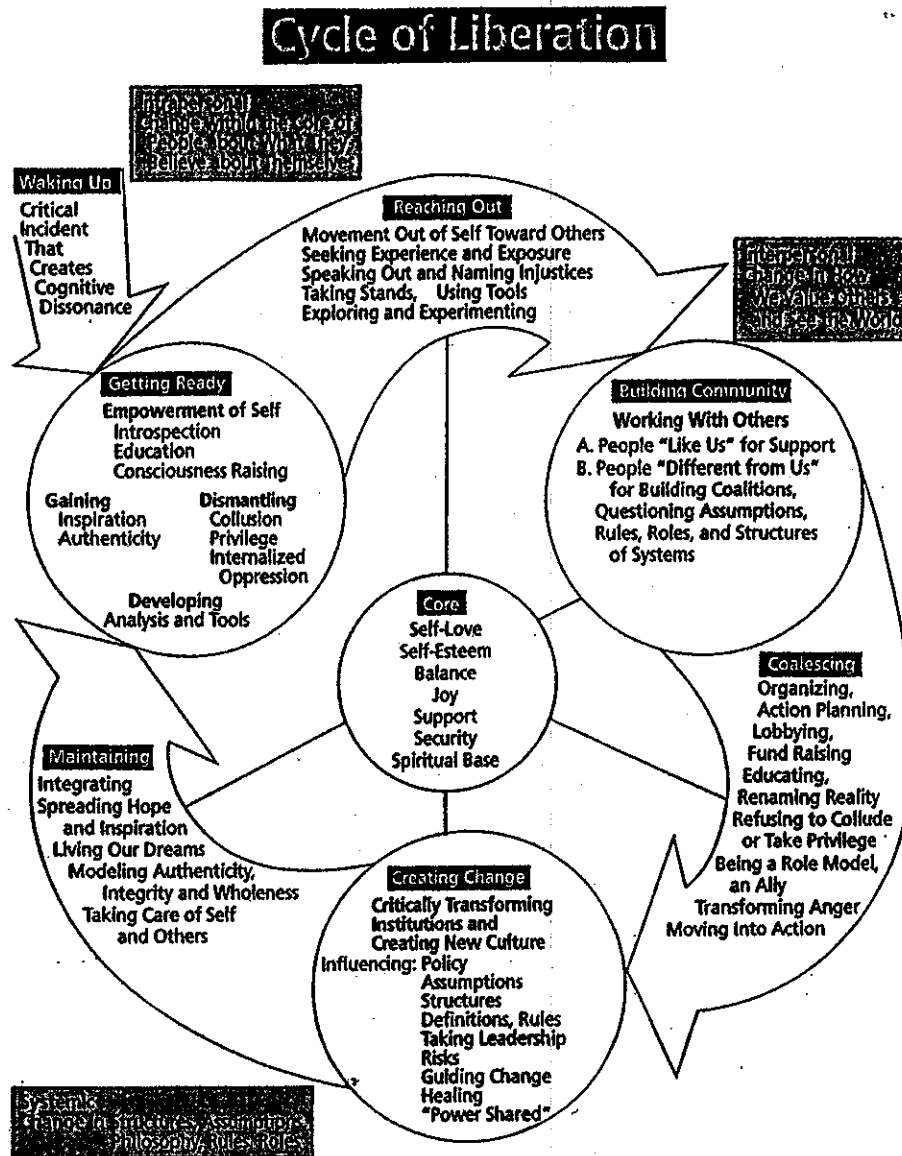Change in Structures, Assumptions,
Philosophy, Rules, Roles

Figure 88.1   The Cycle of Socialization

The Model

The model described in this chapter combines theory, analysis, and practical experience (see fig. 88.1). It describes a cyclical process that seems to occur in most successful social change efforts, leading to some degree of liberation from oppression for those involved, regardless of their roles. It is important to note that one can enter the cycle at any point, through slow evolution or a critical incident, and will repeat or recycle many times in the process. There is no specific beginning or end point, just as one is never "done" working to end oppression. Although there is not a specific sequence of events in the cycle, it is somewhat predictable that all of the levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic) will occur at some point.

Waking Up

Often liberation begins when a person begins to experience herself differently in the world than s/he has in the past. It is marked by an intrapersonal change: a change in the core of someone about what s/he believes about her/himself. This may be the result of a critical incident or a long slow evolutionary process that shifts our worldviews. I refer to this phase as the *waking up* phase. We may experience some form of cognitive dissonance, where something that used to make sense to us (or that we never questioned), ceases to makes sense. Perhaps a white mother adopts a child who is Puerto Rican and in dealing with her expectations for the child suddenly realizes that she has more deeply based racist attitudes than she thought she did. Perhaps a heterosexual woman who has a gay coworker recognizes that the longer she works with him, the more "ordinary" he becomes to her, and the more she gets angry when people make antigay remarks. Perhaps a welfare recipient begins to get angry that she is often treated with disrespect by service providers and the general public, and begins to see the disrespect as a pattern of how poorer people are treated in the United States. Any of these examples could mark the beginning of the Cycle of Liberation.

Getting Ready

Once we know something, we can't *not* know it anymore. The process may not begin immediately, but odds are that it will begin at some point. Often the first part of the process involves a *getting ready* phase. This involves consciously dismantling and building aspects of ourselves and our worldviews based on our new perspectives. Processes that are central to this first part of liberation are introspection, education, and consciousness raising. We become introspective to identify which aspects of our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors need to be challenged. We tend to pay attention to and inventory thoughts, language, and actions to see if they are consistent with our newly recognized beliefs, or if they need to be dismantled. We may discover that we need to educate ourselves: read more, talk to people, bounce ideas and views around with others, begin listening to the news with new ears, seek expertise. We may begin to "make sense" of our experiences differently and seek out more chances to explore what we thought we knew, and how it compares to the reality. We may start exercising our questioning and challenging skills to expand our conscious understanding of the world.

This *getting ready* phase is composed of dismantling our wrong or diminishing beliefs (stereotypes, ignorance or misinformation), our discriminatory or privileged attitudes (superiority or inferiority), and behaviors that limit ourselves or others (collusion, oppressive language, or resignation). It also involves developing a consistency among what we believe, how we want to live our lives, and the way we actually do it. We move toward gaining authenticity and coherence between our worldview and how we live. We begin to see connections among all of the aspects of our lives and move toward integrity. Part of this phase also includes developing a coherent analysis of oppression and building a repertoire of skills and tools that will serve us throughout the rest of the process. We begin to take steps to empower ourselves.

The mother of the Puerto Rican child might decide to read about Puerto Rican history and cultures, talk to her Puerto Rican coworker, trace the origins of her assumptions and expectations about her child, or begin to catch herself when she makes excuses for her child's behavior. The heterosexual coworker may take a course on the gay rights movement, or pick up a copy of a gay newspaper, or ask her gay coworker to dinner. The woman on welfare may read a book on welfare rights, or start listening to the economic news, or start to keep a list of examples of "corporate welfare" totaling how much money goes from the federal government to large corporations when they are in financial trouble.

Reaching Out

Almost inevitably, as we are getting ready, it becomes necessary for us to seek exper ences outside ourselves in order to check our reality and to expose ourselves to a wide range of difference than we had before. We need to practice using our skills and tool with others, and experiment with expressing our new views, and speaking out when w disagree, instead of staying silent. This *reaching out* phase provides us with feedback abou how our new worldviews will be met by others. We may get pressure from some to sto: making waves, and accept the status quo (and this may arrest some people's progress fo a while), and we may get encouragement and new friends as a result of taking a stan on something that we were quiet about before.

The adoptive mother may change social workers so she can talk to a Puerto Rica social worker about her child. She may suggest to her partner that they take a class ir Spanish, or attend a local Puerto Rican festival. The heterosexual coworker may disclos in a conversation with friends that she supports the domestic partnership clause in thei benefit package, or she may have a talk with her kids about not using the term *gay* to mean something bad. She may invite her gay coworker *and his partner* to dinner, or draw comparisons between her primary relationship and his. The woman on welfare may attend her first welfare rights meeting. She may object assertively when she is treated with disdain for using food stamps by the person behind her in the checkout line. She may decide to share her list of examples of corporate welfare with two friends also on welfare. All of these actions mark the transition from intrapersonal to interpersonal liberation.

Building Community

The Interpersonal phase of the liberation process is marked by a change in how we value others and interact with them on a regular basis. It is the phase of *building commu- nity*, and consists of two steps: dialoguing with *people who are like us* for support (people who have the same social identities as we do, with regard to this issue of oppression), and dialoguing with *people who are different from us* for gaining understanding and building coalitions. This phase is characterized by the creation of an ongoing dialogue, where views are exchanged, people are listened to and valued, and we begin to view each oth- ers' points of view as making sense and having integrity, even if they are very different from our own.

In the first step, building community with people who are like us, we seek out people who may have similar experiences to our own, and talk with them to see how they have made sense of their experiences and what we can learn from them. This often begins hap- pening informally, and even sometimes unconsciously: two mothers with adopted chil- dren meet in the pediatricians waiting room and start comparing notes, or two neighbors who both receive welfare benefits talk in the laundry about their frustrations, or two friends going for a hike begin discussing "the gay people" who work with both of them. With increased knowledge and consciousness, these people might start looking for more organized forms of support discussions. These dialogues serve to prove to people that they are not alone in their situation, that there is a bigger "system" operating, that oth- ers have faced and are facing similar situations as our own, and that there are more strategies, ideas, and options than we had initially thought. We feel confirmed, and like we are part of a group that wants to change its role with regard to oppression.

A large part of this interpersonal step also involves dialoguing about how we see the "other" group (those with power if we are disempowered, or the disempowered if we pos- sess power and/or privilege), and beginning to identify things that we may mutually have in common. We have moved out of stereotyping the "other" and have discovered those "others" who are more like us than different from us. We may begin to see that the "other"

is no more to blame for the oppression than we are—that, in fact, we are both victims of a larger system that pushed us into roles. With this realization, a new level of analysis begins, and it becomes inevitable and necessary to expand our dialogue to include "others."

It's important to note that both privileged groups and targeted groups need to find this support step. We can't change *our* roles only; we must address changing the roles of *everyone* involved, as well as the assumptions and structures of the entire system, and we cannot do that alone. Coalitions are a necessity, and dialoguing across differences is the first step to building coalitions. We will never be able to focus on the real challenge—changing the system—until the barriers and boundaries that divide us are minimized. They will not be eliminated, but they can be significantly diminished in potency and clarified through the dialogue process.

This is not to say that creating dialogues about and across differences is easy. An integral part of this dialogue is exploring our differences, clarifying them, erasing assumptions, and replacing them with firsthand contact and good listening. That means that we must talk about our differences in a civil manner. It is useful, even desirable, to create together some guidelines for how our dialogues across differences will take place, and some principles to guide the process. These are best negotiated by all the parties who will participate.

Our mission is to question and challenge assumptions, structures and rules of the system of oppression, and to clarify our different needs, perceptions, strengths, resources, and skills in the process. Done well, these dialogues result in a deeper and richer repertoire of options and opportunities for changing the system. We are enhanced in many ways: our energy, our resources, our inspiration, our understanding, our compassion, our empathy, our humanness, and our motivation are all expanded in this process. We discover and are sustained by inspirations that we have not met before. With these new springboards, we move into the coalescing phase.

Coalescing

Having minimized our barriers, joined with allies, and fortified our resolve, we are ready to move into action to interrupt the oppressive system. We may organize, plan actions, lobby, do fund raising, educate and motivate members of the uninvolved public. We coalesce and discover that we have more power as a coalition. This gives us encouragement and confidence. We may find ourselves taking more overt stands, expressing ourselves more assertively, rallying people to support us as we respond to overt oppression. We have begun to "see our reality" differently, and are naming ourselves differently. We are a "we" now, rather than adversaries. We are on the same side as those in our coalition, and that often surprises and confuses the system. We are refusing to "play our roles" and "stay in our places" as we had done before. We are refusing to collude in oppression, and to participate in self-fulfilling prophesies. We are refusing to accept privileges, and we are acting as role models and allies for others. We are interrupting the status quo, by speaking out calmly and with self-confidence. In this process, we have transformed our energy away from anger, frustration, guilt, and mistrust, and toward hope, shared power, trust, and optimism. We begin to see evidence that, working together, and organizing, we can make a difference. This doesn't mean that we will be successful at everything we try, but our likelihood of creating change is greatly enhanced.

Creating Change

The parameters of this phase of the cycle of liberation include using our critical analysis of the assumptions, structures, rules, and roles of the existing system of oppression, and our coalition power, to begin transforming the system. This means creating anew a culture that reflects our coalition's collective identity: new assumptions, new structures,

new roles, and new rules consistent with a more socially just and equitable philosophy. It includes operating from a shifted worldview, where the values of a diverse and united community shape the system. It involves forming partnerships across differences to increase shared power. This manifests in influencing structure, policy, and management of organizations and systems of which we are a part. It involves taking leadership, taking risks, and guiding change. We must continue to heal from past differences by sharing power and by redefining power as collective power, power within, and power created through cooperation. In this phase, the very essence of the system is transformed, and nothing can remain the same after the transformation.

People experience this kind of transformation on a personal level, when, for example they or someone in their family is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Priorities shift, and what is important becomes totally different. With regard to oppression, some examples of critical transformation have occurred when psychiatric facilities began to appoint consumers to their boards of directors, or when community funding agencies began to be run by community constituents rather than elected officials. Critical transformation may take place when an organization decides to use only consensus decision making for all policy decisions, or to use a flat collaborative management structure rather than hierarchical.

Critical transformation in our examples might happen like this. The heterosexual coworker and the gay coworker might organize a human rights committee in their workplace; conduct dialogues among employees and a public awareness campaign; design a new domestic partners' benefits amendment and a new policy protecting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people from discrimination in the workplace. The person receiving welfare benefits might join a welfare rights coalition that lobbies local legislators, speak at a hearing in the state capital, and propose a referendum that for every dollar spent on "corporate welfare" in their state a dollar must also be spent on domestic welfare. The white mother of the Puerto Rican child might join a local Puerto Rican political action committee working to reform curriculum to include relevant Puerto Rican history, literature, famous people, and current events in her child's school. The committee might also be working to reform policies on bilingual education district-wide, so that her child can study and learn in both Spanish and English.

Efforts to critically transform systems are greatly enhanced by a wide range of resources, perspectives and creativity being brought to bear on a commonly defined problem. If good dialogue has taken place and the coalitions are as inclusive of every perspective as possible, systemic change becomes the logical outcome rather than an unlikely or unattainable goal. Making transformation happen is not, however, the last step. Creative new structures, assumptions, rules and roles must be maintained and nurtured.

Maintaining

In order to succeed, change needs to be strengthened, monitored, and integrated into the ritual of daily life. Just like anything new, it needs to be taken care of, learned about, "debugged," and modified as needed. It's rare if not impossible that new structures, assumptions, rules and roles are perfect or all-inclusive. It is imperative that a diverse group of "maintainers" work together to keep the change efforts aimed at their goals, and provided with resources. It's also necessary to celebrate successful change efforts. This process says to the larger world, "Look, this can work. You can change things by dialoguing and working together." It spreads hope and inspiration, and provides a model for others.

When a diverse group of people have worked to understand one another, and have created critical transformation together, we teach the lesson of hope and peace. It becomes increasingly possible that we can live our dream of equality and justice for all

people. We become more human, more whole, more authentic, more integrated, and by living this way, we increase the likelihood that the human species will survive.

The Core of the Cycle of Liberation

At the core of the cycle of liberation is a set of qualities or states of being that hold it together. Some of these are present when people first begin the cycle, and they are nurtured, elaborated on, filled out, and matured as we proceed through the various phases. They exist and operate on both the individual and collective levels throughout the process of liberation. They are made stronger with each phase and with each human connection we make. Liberation is *the practice of love*. It is developing a sense of self that we can love, and learning to love others with their differences from us. Liberation is *finding balance* in our individual lives and in the agendas of our coalitions. Balance keeps us upright and oriented, moving toward our goals. Liberation is the *development of competence*, the ability to make something happen consistent with a goal. It is taking charge of our own destiny and creating the world we want to live in, together with all the others we need to survive. Liberation is the *belief that we can succeed*, a sense of confidence in ourselves and in our collective efforts. Liberation is *joy* at our collective efficacy and at surviving in a world that sometimes tries to kill us. Liberation is the knowledge that *we are not alone*. It is mutual support, encouragement, and trust that others will be there if we fall, and that we need to be there for others. Liberation is *commitment* to the effort of critical transformation, to the people in our community, to the goal of equity and justice, and to love. Liberation is *passion and compassion*, those strong and motivating feelings that we must live by our hearts as well as our minds. Liberation is based in something far bigger than me as an individual, or us as a coalition, or our organization as a community, or any one nation, or any particular world. It's about that force that connects us all to one another as living beings, that force that is defined differently by every spiritual belief system but which binds us by the vision that there can be a better world and we can help to create it.

References

This model is the product of the thinking of several colleagues, specifically Felice Yeskel and Jerry Koch-Gonzales and myself, and the version described here is my latest adaptation.

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CYCLE OF LIBERATION

INTRAPERSONAL:
CHANGE WITHIN THE CORE
OF PEOPLE ABOUT
WHAT THEY BELIEVE
ABOUT THEMSELVES

WAKING UP
CRITICAL INCIDENT
THAT
CREATES
COGNITIVE
DISSONANCE

REACHING OUT
MOVEMENT OUT OF SELF TOWARD
OTHERS, SEEKING EXPERIENCE AND
EXPOSURE, SPEAKING OUT AND
NAMING INJUSTICES

TAKING STANDS
USING TOOLS
EXPLORING +
EXPERIMENTING

GETTING READY
EMPOWERMENT OF SELF
INTROSPECTION
EDUCATION
CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

GAINING: DISMANTLING:
INSPIRATION   COLLUSION
AUTHENTICITY   PRIVILEGE
                       INTERNALIZED
                       OPPRESSION
DEVELOPING: ANALYSIS
            AND TOOLS

INTERPERSONAL:
CHANGE IN HOW
WE VALUE
OTHERS +
SEE THE
WORLD

MAINTAINING
INTEGRATING

SPREADING
HOPE AND
INSPIRATION

LIVING OUR
DREAMS

MODELING
AUTHENTICITY,
INTEGRITY +
WHOLENESS

TAKING CARE OF
SELF + OTHERS

CORE
SELF-LOVE
SELF ESTEEM
BALANCE
JOY
SUPPORT
SECURITY
SPIRITUAL BASE

**BUILDING
COMMUNITY**
WORKING WITH OTHERS
A. PEOPLE "LIKE US" FOR SUPPORT
B. PEOPLE "DIFFERENT FROM US" FOR
BUILDING COALITIONS
QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS
RULES, ROLES, AND STRUCTURES
OF SYSTEM

COALESCING
ORGANIZING,
ACTION PLANNING
LOBBYING, FUND
RAISING
EDUCATING,
RENAMING REALITY
REFUSING TO COLLUDE
OR TAKE PRIVILEGE

CREATING CHANGE
CRITICALLY
TRANSFORMING INSTITUTIONS +
CREATING NEW CULTURE
INFLUENCING: POLICY, ASSUMPTIONS,
STRUCTURES,
DEFINITIONS, RULES
TAKING LEADERSHIP, RISKS,
GUIDING CHANGE, HEALING
"POWER SHARED"

MOVING
INTO
ACTION

BEING A ROLE MODEL,
AN ALLY,
TRANSFORMING
ANGER

SYSTEMIC:
CHANGE IN:
    STRUCTURES
    ASSUMPTIONS
    PHILOSOPHY
    RULES
    ROLES