

# **Transformative Organizing: Towards Liberation of Self and Society**

## **Part 1**

### **An Authentic Reckoning**

Incredible shifts have happened over the past few years that will forever change how Americans relate to politics, the economy, and the world. The election of Barack Obama, despite the mainstream character of his policies, undeniably signals a new dawn in American politics that many did not think possible for at least another 50 years. In addition, the economic crisis that continues to affect the US and the world is having an impact on the well-being of many families generally, and is having a devastating impact on communities already economically and politically marginalized, the likes of which hasn't been seen since the Great Depression 80 years ago. Finally, the reality of global warming will force the entirety of the planet's industrialized economy to permanently change its relationship to energy use, one way or another.

Important political battles are raging. Merely a few months ago there was an opportunity to dramatically change healthcare in this country, something that the majority of Americans is in favor of, yet what we witnessed instead was a surging backlash against change. And most recently, the battle to redefine immigration policy has taken a turn for the worst, as shown by the passage of SB1070 in Arizona.

The past year has revealed more sharply than ever the glaring deficiencies in the infrastructure and capacity of the social justice sector. Obviously social justice work, and in particular grassroots organizing, is incredibly important to the building of an authentic democracy. Historically, major social advances in this country can be traced to the spark of grassroots organizing, whether that be in the South in the 1950s or in Northern and Western urban areas in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet in the last couple of decades that infrastructure has weakened to the point where much of the sector has been caught off guard and unable to seize incredibly important organizing opportunities, made even more poignant by the healthcare and immigration battles that progressives are losing.

It is time for the social justice movement to have an authentic reckoning with its effectiveness. The current moment indicates that in many ways history is at a turning point. This is also a potential turning point in the evolution of social justice organizing – although the environment is changing rapidly, the organizing models that are most prevalent date from 40 years ago or more. There is a major opportunity for the social justice movement to reassess its approach, envision a new way of organizing, and greatly increase its impact. The question is: Will the social justice movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century meet the changing times as they demand, or be swept into the dustbin of history?

Social Justice Leadership is proposing new a framework, Transformative Organizing (TO), with the potential to change the basic approach and assumptions of social justice organizing and to greatly expand its impact. TO is about creating deep change in how we are as people, how we relate to each other, and how we structure society. It brings together approaches to transformative change, ideological development, and impactful grassroots organizing to create a new paradigm for organizing.

Most social justice organizing in the United States, both current and historical, has had an outward focus on building power and leadership to change local conditions, public policy and resource allocation. It generally has been pragmatic in its orientation, focusing on short- to medium-term change. While this approach has won important victories that have affected the lives of millions, its focus on external, short term change has greatly limited its potential. Transformative Organizing combines an ambitious organizing approach with attention to personal and organizational transformation, and an emphasis on long-term vision, ideology and movement building. The result is an approach to social change that can be far more powerful than the sum of its parts.

Most importantly, Transformative Organizing demands that organizers and the social justice movement step fully and powerfully into the uncertainty and opportunity of the present historical moment in order to best bring about a societal transformation to true justice and compassion, equality and interdependence.

### **The Goal: Liberation from Oppression, Liberation from Suffering**

The long-term goal of Transformative Organizing is simple: to help transform society into one that is free from oppression and free from suffering. The path to get there, on the other hand, will undoubtedly be fraught with difficulties, setbacks, moments of victory, uncertainty, and even downright mystery. There are no easy or straightforward roads to this vision. And undoubtedly what is required to get to true social transformation is more than just organizing – there are other components that are required to transform society that must work in tandem with the on-the-ground organizing.

Transformative Organizing, however, is foundational for the social transformation process because it engages the populations most excluded from the workings and benefits of society. It differs from more traditional notions of social change in at least 2 aspects: 1) TO does not confine itself to systemic or structural change alone, but seeks to integrate personal transformation and transformation of our relationships, and 2) TO, as the name suggests, seeks transformation, not merely change – it seeks a process so deep and thorough that a reversal to previous conditions is impossible.

Transformative Organizing recognizes that people experience oppression and exploitation from the political and economic system, and that people also experience suffering from the situation of their existence.

### **Oppression, Suffering, and How They Are Related**

Oppression generally takes the form of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, able-ism, etc. wherein the dominant group in society subjugates other groups and extracts their labor, wealth, bodies, identity, dignity, and more, for the benefit of the dominant group. More specifically it manifests as some form of violence, exploitation and exclusion such as police abuse, poor wages, lack of healthcare, homelessness and substandard housing, domestic violence, racial profiling, deportation, etc.

The current form of social justice organizing is well-oriented to these forms of direct and indirect violence and has for the last 50 years tried to systematically organize people to oppose this system and fight for an alternative that is more just. Oppression manifests in the lives of individuals, but it is systemic – it is structured through the political system, the economy, and civil society. Thus, while individual lives can be sheltered from abuse and exploitation, oppression is a system-wide phenomenon and therefore can only be transformed at the systemic level through changing the structures, practices, and culture of the whole society.

Suffering, on the other hand, is simply a way to describe the anxiety, fear, stress, disappointment, self-loathing, and other psychological and emotional conditions that show up in people's lives. The social justice movement is in general not particularly well-oriented to dealing with this. The key distinction is that suffering is an internal response to the external conditions that we face. Some suffering is a result of oppression, other suffering is not. In many cases the suffering that poor and working class people, or any exploited group, experience is directly related to the oppression they are subjected to. Job exploitation, police violence, or other forms of oppression can be physically incapacitating (even deadly) and it can also be psychologically and emotionally paralyzing. The fear, doubt, self-hatred, and internalized oppression that can come from these experiences is a form of suffering.

Suffering can be related to oppression, but it can also be generated from other life experiences. For example, a consistent feeling of self-disappointment may be related to having an “over-achieving” older sibling, and always feeling the need to play catch-up. This can evolve into a paralyzing lack of confidence, particularly if a person's parents discouraged or ignored their achievements while showing greater support and encouragement for the sibling. Paralysis, disappointment, and doubt can result from these kinds of conditions and from traumatic experiences, or from other relationships at work or with loved ones (or even people's relationships to themselves), but these feelings may have little to do with systemic oppression.

In either situation, the internal response can take the form of suffering. Suffering (whether it is stress rooted in police oppression or stress from being ignored by one's parents) becomes a barrier to people bringing their best selves, particularly in interpersonal relationships or in their relationship to themselves.

Many people in the world, and many organizers in the social justice movement, are caught in the grips of suffering. The suffering shows up as non-productive behavior, moods, or mindsets that can hamper effectiveness, be the cause of difficult relationships, and even derail whole organizations. At its worst, the suffering takes the form of people unconsciously playing out their trauma in the organizational or movement space, with predictable results of broken organizational relationships, isolation from allies, and ultimately stagnation.

Although both oppression and suffering can be isolating, damaging, and imprisoning, and they can even be related, they are not the same thing. Suffering is internally generated whereas oppression is imposed from the outside.

The experience of Nelson Mandela is instructive. The South African government imprisoned him for opposing the racist apartheid regime, a clear example of oppression. The political system imposed a condition of oppression on him that he didn't want and that he was powerless to stop. The oppression was externally generated. Still, his 27 years of imprisonment was undoubtedly brutal and dehumanizing, yet he never let the experience take away his own sense of dignity and self. It was an experience of oppression and pain, but he refused to let it be one of suffering. He did not allow the experience to generate feelings of suffering that eroded his own internal integrity, his internal wholeness. At the end, Mandela left prison seemingly more balanced and poised than many of his comrades who were not jailed. He ultimately led his country into a new era from a place of vision, compassion, and reconciliation.

The difference between oppression and suffering is important because it means that different actions are required to transform them. Oppression is exerted from the outside, whereas suffering, as the term is being used here, comes from the inside. Thus oppression requires engaging society's structures in order to abolish it, whereas suffering requires engaging ourselves in order to end it.

Transformative Organizing sees that both oppression and suffering are impediments to people living whole lives, bringing their best selves, reaching their potential, and finding fulfillment. True freedom is incomplete without liberation from oppression and liberation from suffering.

### **Steps on the Path**

It is essential to engage external oppression and internal suffering at the same time and through an integrated process because they work together in a vicious cycle to keep each other alive. When people are oppressed, their reaction can often be to internalize the oppression by taking on the narrative of inferiority that the oppressor promotes. This internalized oppression is a form of suffering – it is conditioned by external oppression but it is an internally generated response that degrades the wholeness, integrity, and sense of self of the person. This internal suffering (and actually any suffering) can impede people from taking action to end the external oppression because the stress and self-loathing hinder them from bringing their most effective, confident, clear-thinking and clear-feeling selves to the task of liberating themselves from external oppression. The inaction caused by the internal suffering then allows the external oppression to continue and become normalized, and even to grow, in turn causing ever more suffering.

Liberation from oppression and liberation from suffering require transformation in at least two spheres: 1) the transformation of society based on the highest form of justice, democracy, and equality and 2) the transformation of ourselves and our relationships based on authenticity, interdependence and compassion.

#### **1. Creation of a society based on justice, democracy, and equality**

This broader goal of social transformation focuses on the political, social, and economic structural relationships between people and groups (by race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, etc) that determine laws, allocation of resources, and decision-making at the societal level. Structural relationships would be reorganized so that systemic oppression no longer existed.

Social transformation would mean transforming the economy into one that is rooted in guaranteeing that all people get their needs met, rather than one based on individual gain. It would be an economy where “productivity” is a measure of fulfillment and not a measure of how much product can saturate a market. It would be an economy that has a fair and just distribution of wealth amongst all people.

It would also require re-imagining and re-creating how people engage with politics, moving it from marking a ballot once every few years, to creating structures that allow real participation in the decision-making of community, city, state and national affairs.

## **2. Transformation of ourselves and our relationships based on interdependence, compassion, and authenticity**

The practices and habits of society as a whole are deeply embedded in its people. And despite the uniqueness of every individual, the practices of individuals help to keep the collective culture alive. The habits of society are replicated in the behavior of individuals, and how they relate to themselves, others, and society as a whole. Thus if the goal is true social transformation, it is essential to greatly increase self-awareness of default habits, and to begin embodying intentional practices that reflect the values of a more just society.

Of all people, those who have taken up the challenge of transforming society, be they paid staff or grassroots members, have the responsibility of identifying the ways that they individually replicate and promote practices of the individualistic, competitive, and oppressive society. And they have the responsibility of demonstrating through lived practice what a renewed and just society can look like – embodying interdependence, compassion, and authenticity in all relationships.

These two spheres are integrally linked. The shape of society, its systems, and institutions has a profound impact on the experience of individual people’s lives. As discussed already, oppression can lead to internal suffering, on top of the externally imposed injustice, pain, and misery it can cause for the oppressed.

Alternatively, if society is fundamentally just, if society is structured to help people get their needs met and to find meaning in their lives, then it will help alleviate individual suffering. It will alleviate it certainly from the abolishment of oppression, but also from reducing conditions that cause people to have stress, fear, anxiety about the future, self-loathing about the inadequacies that society tells them they have, and other forms of degraded sense of self.

The converse is true also. When people are stressed, anxious, uncertain, or self-hating, then they are more brittle and fragile, and thus more self-protective rather than being more outwardly compassionate. They are less likely to extend trust to others and be more curious about them, instead becoming pre-occupied with their own well-being and not the well-being of others. The well-being of others can in turn often be seen as an annoyance, and can even escalate to being seen as a threat. The scapegoating of immigrants, African Americans, and other disenfranchised groups – which we have seen happen time and again – comes in part from this place of society-wide stress

and suffering, most prevalent during eras of uncertainty or shrinking resources, such as during wars or periods of rising unemployment.

Thus, if people reduce their level of anxiety and doubt, if they have less reason to look for quick fixes to alleviate the background stress in their lives, whether it be through scapegoating other ethnicities, genders, or nationalities, or through alcohol and drugs, sugar, television, or shopping – if people have less suffering in their lives – there is a greater likelihood that they would be able to extend compassion to those who are living harsher lives, to those who are being excluded from the benefits of society. They would be more able to support long-term solutions for addressing society's problems, solutions that help to alleviate the overall conditions that contribute to both oppression and suffering.

This raises the question of how much of a democratic, just, and equal society can we have if suffering isn't ended. And it raises the converse question of how much can people, all people, be free of internally-generated stress, doubt, and suffering if oppression, exploitation, and exclusion in society as a whole is not abolished. This dilemma is illustrated in the two figures below (see Fig 1 and Fig 2)

Figure 1

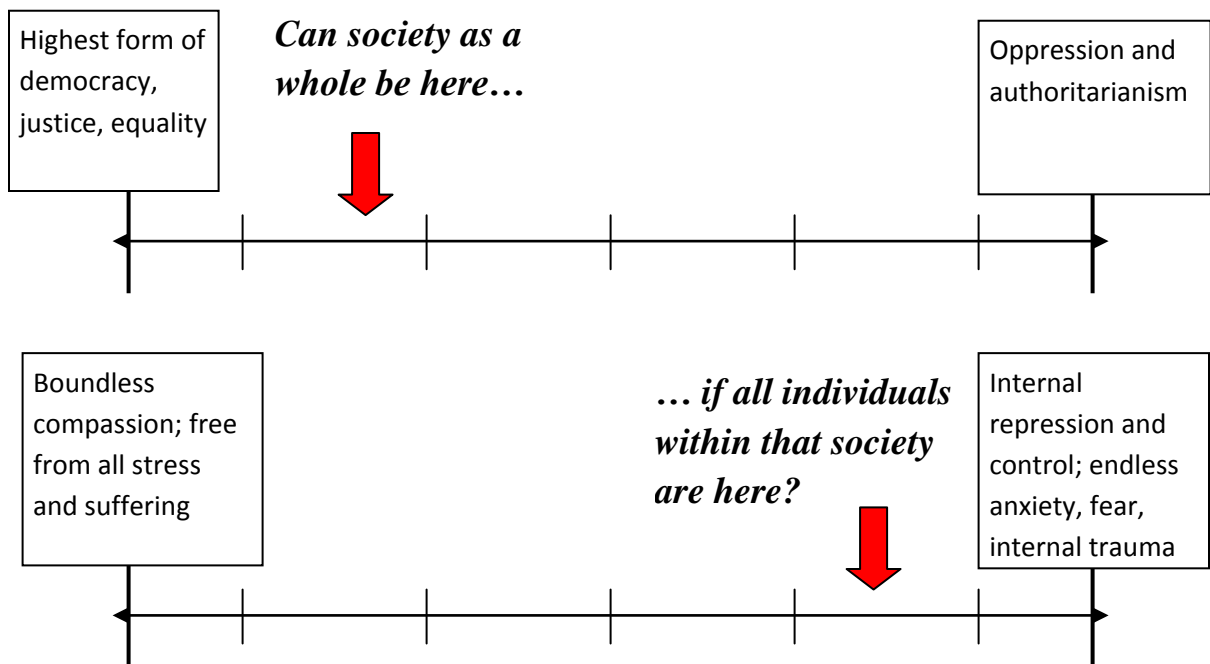
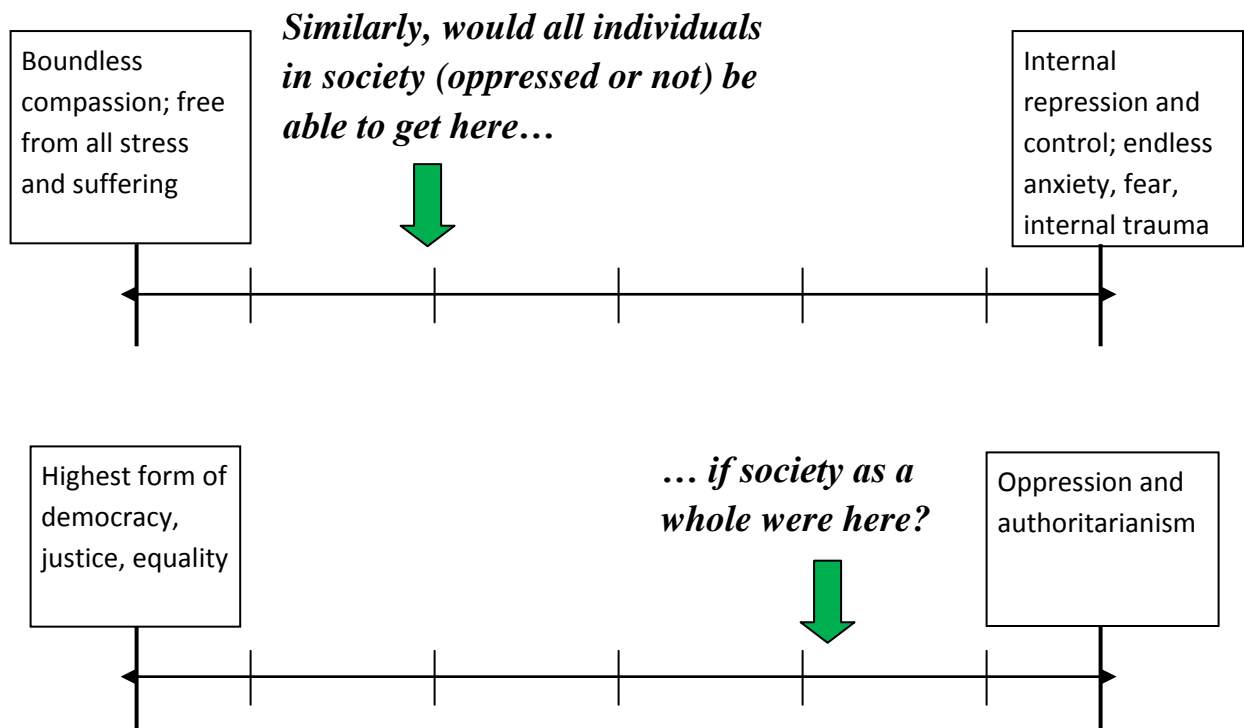


Figure 2



The above figures imply that society cannot reach the highest form of democracy, equality, and justice if the people in that society endure stress, anxiety, and other forms of suffering (regardless of whether or not that suffering is related to oppression). And that people in society cannot be free from internal suffering if society has external oppression structured into it. In other words, freedom at the societal level is conditioned by and related to freedom at the internal/individual level, and freedom at the internal/individual level is conditioned by and related to freedom at the societal level.

Transformative Organizing sees the need to engage both levels, simultaneously and integrated, as essential to bringing about the long-term and sustainable social transformation we all seek. It puts us on the best footing for transforming our political, social, and economic systems, our relationships to other people, and our collective relationship to the earth. Not doing so will ultimately limit the kind of social change we are able to bring. It is only when significant progress in the two arenas happen that we have the possibility of true transformation. When societal structures and practices irreversibly evolve, and when people's hearts, minds, values and behavior fundamentally advance, only then can authentic transformation happen. All else is merely change.

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*This is the first of a two-part strategy statement produced by Social Justice Leadership. For more information, visit [www.sojustlead.org](http://www.sojustlead.org)*