

LIBERATION AND CHARTING THE LIBERATORY CONSCIOUSNESS

patched together from works by Barbara J. Love, Keri DeJong, Christopher Hughbanks, and Josh Martinez

Liberation is the often-overlooked pair to the concept of antiracism. Antiracism cannot stand alone: if we are to destroy the master's house, we still need a place to live. Liberation gives us the space to imagine that future home. As we build that new home, we also have to be careful. As we walk together into the future, how can we ensure that we leave behind the mistakes of the past?

In short, liberation is true equality. It means systems, practices, and relationships that center equity and fairness. Goods, services, benefits and rewards are equally available to all. Every human can take part in these systems. Those systems support every human's full humanity. Now compare that world to the world of today. Every difference and injustice that we notice is our liberatory consciousness. When we know the world is unfair, we are better equipped to change it, and we commit ourselves to doing so.

Assumptions about Liberation

1. We can envision liberation for our lifetime, and achieve it. A world of true equals is not only possible, we can make it happen. We have all the tools, knowledge, and power to do it.
2. Liberation benefits all of us. People harmed under oppression will no longer feel the pain of that oppression. People who receive the benefits of that oppression will have their burdens relieved.
3. Humans are inherently good. The society we all built (or contribute to) functions through oppression. Phones and clothing are cheap through sweatshop or enslaved labor. People would feel better not being a part of that oppression.
4. Liberation interrupts disconnect. Oppression works by erecting walls between "us" and "them." Oppression creates isolation and disconnectedness between people. Liberation helps us tear down those walls.
5. Liberation builds connections. Liberation helps heal that which divides us. We can connect more fully with other humans, and with our own humanness.
6. Liberation heals our consciousness. Guilt, shame, and blame are central to the functioning of the world we live in. We so often hear that life isn't fair, that we are so different from people in another city or country. Living in liberation helps us heal our consciousness. We can begin to rely on our inherent sense of connection, fairness and justice.
7. Liberation releases the fear enforced by oppression. There's so much unease and precarity in our society. How many people in the united states feel motivated by fear? How many people are afraid to lose what they have? This fear divides us. It tells us that liberation is unlikely if not impossible.
8. Information is not enough. Learning about these systems of oppression is only half the effort. We must also take action to end it.
9. Liberation is a journey and a destination. We can't end oppression by oppressing others. If we are to arrive at liberation, we have to practice it on the way as well.
10. Liberation is contagious. As people begin to heal from oppression, they will create and add to the systemic changes we need. Individual actions will lead to collective actions.

Liberation Praxis

These propositions help form the basis of liberation, why we must do what we must do. If we desire liberation, we must practice it in our daily lives. Academics describe this as praxis. Love, DeJong, and Hughbanks have a few recommendations for this as well.

Daily Enactments. Learning without action is pointless. When we hold a vision of liberation, we must also make choices that will lead towards that vision. What can we do today that will lead to liberation? What can we do today that will set the stage for the actions of tomorrow? The vision itself—personalized, important to us—is what matters. We'll hold that vision close as we make decisions throughout the day. Does this decision move us closer to further away from our vision of liberation? Are we reinforcing oppression, or working to transform it into something else?

Sustainability. This article is more than a decade old. Its lessons are even more important now with everything we face. Living in a society that oppresses us can wear us down. Many of us feel the conditioning that tells us to downplay our own well-being. Many people feel burnout or exhaustion from doing the best they can every day. Working towards liberation means having compassion for yourself, too. They close this section with a quote:

"We spend so much of our day posing resistance. We are so often working against—working to stop, to end, to dismantle, to disrupt, to interrupt, to shut up, to close down. We are constantly saying "no" as we put up walls to protect ourselves and each other from the toxic energy that an oppressive society feeds us." [...] AND, in order to experience what it means to be fully human, in order to sustain ourselves in this work, we need to be able to say "yes". [...] We need to, and we get to, make choices to envision what we do want, enact what we do want, while we are pushing against what we don't want. Sustainability requires that balance."

Community. Community is essential for liberation. We cannot create liberation for only ourselves. We necessarily create it for everyone around us, for people we don't know and have yet to meet. Community is so vital because it is the only institution built to serve everyone. We use the connections within community to nurture and sustain liberation for all.

Love. It takes great love to imagine a world where everyone can belong. Oppressive societies receive fuel from hate and disconnect. We replace oppression with liberation by replacing hate with love.

Concepts of a Liberatory Consciousness

To be effective as a liberation worker--that is, one who is committed to changing systems and institutions characterized by oppression to create greater equity and social justice - a crucial step is the development of a liberatory consciousness. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather than on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of oppression characterizing society without giving in to despair and hopelessness about that condition, to maintain an awareness of the role played by each individual in the maintenance of the system without blaming them for the roles they play, and at the same time practice intentionality about changing the systems of oppression. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live "outside" the

patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive systems.

The process for developing a liberatory consciousness has been discussed by many educators working for social change and social justice. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, described it as developing critical consciousness. Carter G. Woodson described it as changing the "miseducation of the Negro." Michael Albert's humanist vision and bell hooks's feminist critical consciousness are examples of other ways that a liberatory consciousness has been discussed.

Four elements in developing a liberatory consciousness are described here. They include awareness, analysis, acting, and accountability/ally-ship. The labeling of these four components in the development of a liberatory consciousness is meant to serve as reminders in our daily living that the development and practice of a liberatory consciousness is neither mysterious nor difficult, static nor fixed, or something that some people have and others do not. It is to be continually practiced event by event, each time we are faced with a situation in which oppression or internalized oppression is evident. These labels remind us that every human can acquire the skill to become a liberation worker.

Awareness, the first part of the task, includes practicing awareness or noticing what is happening. The second part includes analyzing what is happening from a stance of awareness along with the possibilities for action. The third part of the task includes deciding on the basis of that analysis what needs to be done, and seeing to it that the action is accomplished. The fourth part may be the most troublesome part for it requires that individuals accept accountability to self and community for the consequences of the action that has been taken or not taken.

Each of these elements are critical to having a liberatory consciousness. First, we must notice the harm. Then, we must understand that it is harmful. Next, we must act to end it. Finally, we must take responsibility for the actions that we did and didn't take. With a liberatory consciousness, every person gets a chance to theorize about issues of equity and social justice, to analyze events related to equity and social justice, and to act in responsible ways to transform the society.

In the end, institutions and systems respond to the initiatives of individuals and groups of individuals. Systems do not perpetuate themselves: they are perpetuated by the actions of people who act automatically on the basis of their socialization. Combining these elements doesn't come easy for everyone. We can't stop at theory. We have to practice and shape our consciousness to achieve liberation. We must also remember that individuals and groups built the society around us. People act automatically according to how they understand the world. We have to break the automatic actions and replace them with meaningful ones.

The development of a liberatory consciousness would allow us the opportunity to reclaim choice in our values and attitudes and consequently, in our response patterns. It would enable us to move from an automatic response system grounded in our socialization, to the capacity to act on a range of responses based on our own awareness, analysis and decision making, and the opportunities we have to learn from our colleagues and others who themselves embarked on a shared journey to liberation.