

Transforming Our Systems, Transforming Ourselves

The Pivotal Role of Healing in Social Change Work

by *Prentis Hemphill*

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The following was adapted from a talk given by Prentis Hemphill, founder and director of The Embodiment Institute and The Black Embodiment Initiative, at the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) 2022 National Conference, in Chicago, Illinois.

Hemphill is a writer and cartographer of emotions, an embodiment facilitator, a political organizer, and a therapist who is unearthing the connections among healing, community, accountability, and our most inspired visions for social transformation. For the last ten years, Hemphill has practiced and taught somatics in social movement organizations and offered embodied practice during moments of social unrest and organizational upheaval. They have taught embodied leadership with Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD), and generative somatics. They served as the Healing Justice director of Black Lives Matter Global Network from 2016 to 2019. Hemphill's work and writing have appeared in the New York Times and the Huffington Post, and they are a contributor to You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience (edited by Tarana Burke and Brené Brown; Random House, 2022), Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation (adrienne maree brown; AK Press, 2021), and The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice (Staci K. Haines; North Atlantic Books, 2019), and they are the host of the acclaimed podcast Finding Our Way. Hemphill lives in North Carolina on a small farm with their partner, two dogs, and two chickens, and is working on an upcoming book on healing justice.





Hey, everybody, how's it going? Thank you for inviting me to speak today. It is really exciting and sweet to be with you all—I haven't been out of the house in years at this point, so it's nice to be together. I have a lot of words, good words—and I will try to move through them and also stay connected to you all as much as I can. I want to extend a lot of gratitude and recognition to this land—to this place in which I am a visitor that has held me so well, and that I know has also held so many of our ancestors.

It was a challenge to put together my words for this talk on healing and social change just four days out of the massacre in Buffalo, in which Black people, and Black elders especially, were gunned down because of white hatred and white nationalist violence.

I feel overwhelmed—I just want to name that—by the barrage of seemingly endless brutality against our people and against our efforts for social change. And it's not missed on me that often, when I'm talking about healing and social change, I feel like I have to almost prove why healing and social change are important, even though we are living in these times when we're witnessing such tragedies.

It feels apparent—but it also reveals to me how accustomed we are in some ways to the suffering of poor and working class people, and the suffering of Black people in particular. So, sometimes these questions of how we heal and how we change can feel flimsy to me against that violence. And not to bring us down but to really ground us—we are in chaotic times generally: over one million deaths from COVID; the fascism that is gaining traction in our country making its intentions toward our bodies and our lives clearer and more realized each day; and climate change and war posing existential threats to all life. All of these, I believe, make it more and more critical that we deepen into and understand these questions.

I've been doing movement and social change work for two decades now. I started as a not very good organizer. But I was brought into abolitionist work and transformative justice models and frameworks, which pushed me toward imagining a world without prisons—which, if we take that a step further, had me think about and understand and feel into the question: If not a system that logically ends in prisons, what might we then build? If prisons and the carceral system became illogical to us, what institutions might we create? What might our communities look like? What might our relationships feel like? How might we be different with each other?

So, that's how I began my work around healing. Those questions led me to explore healing as a necessary component of social change, and I have been doing this healing work inside of movements ever since. I became a therapist—I became a politicized somatics practitioner—and I have been supporting trauma-healing political formations to understand the role of trauma and how it can impede our best efforts toward social change. And I recently founded an organization called The Embodiment Institute, where we are practicing building more just, embodied, relational habits with one another.

I don't think I encountered the words *trauma* and *healing* outside of talking about a wound until I was in college, or after that (and I mean a physical wound). I knew, for example—even though I didn't have the words for it—that what my parents had experienced in their childhood impacted how they showed up with me. I knew that their stories held something inside of them that could be activated, could flare up, and could create more or less threat or danger for us as children. I knew that my parents loved me, but I also knew that what they had to do to ensure our survival often stood in for the tenderness of love that I really longed for as a child.

I also knew that the things that we often did for reprieve, to buoy ourselves up, to remember and listen to the magnificence of life—our Saturday morning dances, our impromptu songs, our deep hugs—were connective rituals in our family. *Saturday mornings, you put the record on and you dance together.* And that helped us and brought us back into connection with each other and into life. So, I knew early on that wounds and memories and our experiences of healing were

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always with us—imperceptible to the eye but incredibly legible to the soul, if we knew how to listen to one another.

I want to briefly explain how I hold trauma, because I think it's important. And I know that this is one of those words that are both over- and underused, but I think it's useful for us to understand what might be happening inside of us. Trauma has always been a political term and a politicized term. Understanding trauma tells the story in some ways of how pain lives inside of us—in our bodies and in our behaviors. And who we identify as having experienced trauma tells a story about who we as a society allow to feel, and whose pain matters to us. We don't acknowledge everyone's trauma equally, and trauma as a field has been showing whose trauma matters over time. But trauma itself is an overwhelming event—that's what they say, an overwhelming event—and it is a condition that breaks apart or stunts our capacity to belong, to experience safety, and to experience dignity. And by many accounts, these are necessary for human survival and for our well-being.

What I really want you to understand about trauma is that *safety* is the internal foundation that allows us to be creative and collaborate with other people. If I'm safe enough, I can create and do things in the world. *Belonging* is our relational sphere. I belong to the species. I belong in my family. I belong in my community. I belong in Earth. *Dignity* is where our self-concept and our self-image lives, and it's often impeded and crowded by the experience of trauma and also by shame. So, safety, belonging, and dignity get broken apart inside of trauma.

And the residue—what lingers—is always inside our relationship with ourselves, and it's always present in our relationships with one another. It's inside and outside experience. We don't often talk about the break in relationality that trauma actually fundamentally is—and it's really important for us to understand that. Also, what I described to you earlier was *generational* trauma—how it gets passed and the meandering ways it wanders through our families and our communities and our lives. It is generational in that way and also epigenetic—as we're learning more and more.

The other thing I want you to understand about trauma is that it's not necessarily one catastrophic event. That's how the idea of trauma originally came about. We think about it as one event that happened, but it can also be conditions. The definition of oppression I often use is that it is *the concentration and distribution of trauma into certain bodies and certain communities*. We often think about it structurally, systemically, but what happens is that oppression concentrates experiences of trauma into certain zip codes, into certain blocks, and into certain bodies. You all with me? I'm packing a lot in, so I just want you to stay with me. So, what happened in Buffalo, for example, is devastating in so many ways. And it's devastating because of the lives of elders—especially—and community members being viciously taken. But it's also devastating because of how it impacts family members. This will have a lasting impact for generations. We're looking at something that will last across time. It spreads. Trauma does not live neatly in one body. It necessarily spreads. It spreads relationally and it spreads across time.

So, why is this important for social change? Why is it important that we're talking about this? In all of these spaces where we are attempting to cultivate and inspire social change, we still often find internal transformation reinstituting these capacities of safety, belonging, and dignity—of strengthening complex human relationships—mysterious. Mysterious, accidental, random—we don't understand it. But I believe—and what I've seen through movement—is that where our wounds are unaddressed, where our own story is not understood, is exactly the same place where the fractures in our organizations occur and the fractures in our movement occur.

I want to talk about mistrust and conflict as an example of that. I've worked with many organizations. I get called in a lot to facilitate conflict work. And if the conflict is not so acute, I usually come in and do a trust training first before I do conflict. Because trust—a trustful environment—is the environment in which conflicts can happen in a generative way. Trust is disrupted by trauma. I talked about how belonging gets ruptured in trauma, and that disrupts our ability to extend trust to one another—to believe that others are trustworthy,

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for example. And we are experiencing, I would say globally in some ways, and especially in this country, a breakdown, an erosion, in trust—a failure of institutions and intentional manipulation or breeding of mistrust inside of the population. We're experiencing a kind of growing suspicion and mistrust. But trust is so necessary. Trust is what makes things happen. It's the lubricant for all social relationships, and especially for collaboration and coordination. So, we have to look at trust as one capacity that's necessary to rebuild in our relationships and in our organizations, because nothing meaningful can happen without it.

I also want to say that the way power and privilege can operate is that if we're used to having power over, it can feel really hard to extend trust to people who don't have as much power. Not extending trust can be a way for us to hold on to certain power dynamics that reinforce who we imagine we are. (And I may or may not be saying this because I'm in a room of philanthropists.) But even that is a relationship to trust that needs to be healed and transformed, I think, in order to have meaningful relationships and to do meaningful and transformative work beyond what you know and understand currently alone.

In short, I believe it's impossible for us to do what we set out to do around social change without understanding and being really skillful at the inner and relational lives that we have. It's impossible for us to transform the world, transform our systems, without being equally willing to transform ourselves and to do that really hard, sometimes painful, deeply uncomfortable work of reckoning with what it is that we have embodied, the systems we have embodied, and the ones that give us identity and meaning that we may as of yet be unwilling to let go.

So, healing. I want to talk about healing and not just trauma. But healing—what is it? I don't know if you experience this, but people talk about healing, and you can be like, What is that? And I know sometimes I struggle when talking with funders or folks in philanthropy about healing, because it can feel so abstract. But what I want to say is that if *trauma* is an overwhelming situation that breaks safety, belonging, and dignity, *healing* is any set of practices or processes that

restore a felt sense of safety, the capacity and desire to belong, and a sense of dignity as evidenced by a reduction of shame and an increase in agency. This is important for me as a practitioner. This is how I think about the work that I do with individuals and organizations. This is how I orient toward it. But healing opens up possibilities for our lives that we have not yet seen, that we cannot even feel, necessarily. Healing also increases our capacity for authentic relationships with one another, and therefore opens us up to a power inside of our movements that we have not seen before.

I think it's important for us to pay really close attention now to the question of how we build the skillfulness to stay together in the midst of very hard things. That's an important skill. Let me call it one of those soft skills—it's one of those soft skills that everything is built on, to be able to stay together through the hardest of things, to build trust, to repair trust, to extend trust to one another, to move through conflict skillfully, to be vulnerable, to allow for intimacy, to vision beyond what you have seen, to look beyond the world that you have inherited and see something more. All of these capacities become more possible when we engage in deep transformative work—when we're not just looking at other people to transform around us but are as deeply committed to our own transformation, as deeply committed to becoming *new*, as our expectation that the world change around us.

This morning, I went to visit an organization that I've worked with over the years and that I love, called the Chicago Torture Justice Center. The center works with survivors of state violence—torture perpetrated by the Chicago Police Department—and we've done embodied healing programs together. We were talking today about how important it is and how difficult it can be to talk about transforming along these axes—safety, belonging, and dignity—but how thinking about healing in this way transforms the very quality of an organization, of the relationships, the power, the effectiveness, and the clarity of the work.

So, what that means is that healing can look like a lot of different things. Healing can—and should—look like

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reparations. It can look like any opportunities for Indigenous and Black people to steward and inhabit land, to have a deep investment in our communities. It can look like creating healing spaces and trainings that give us a spaciousness to untangle the persistent stories and habits that live inside of us, and to have the space to practice new things, to embody new ways of being with one another, where we can experience this real safety, belonging, and dignity. It also means supporting these interventions and culture around social change—obviously, transformative justice, conflict transformation, restorative justice, and also the imaginative work of ritual creation—creating new cultural ways of being with one another and infusing the world more with meaning in terms of our values, so that how we come together is as important as what we do.

A framework that's been critical for our work at The Embodiment Institute is the idea of *transitional characters*. I borrow this term from family systems therapy, which looks at how people take on healing, the trauma that lingers in their lineage, how people who are willing to face and understand the route of violence or abandonment in their own family and then commit to learning new patterns in their own relationships change the course of their lineage.

I have always been really inspired by this concept of transitional characters, and I have also been really clear that we are not only embedded in family systems, we are also embedded in community systems, we are embedded in institutional systems, we are embedded in philanthropic institutions. And as these sites shape us—shape who we are, shape our habits, shape the way we talk, shape the way that we show up—they're also incredible sites for transformation. They are the places that we can shape back. We are shaped and we shape back—that's part of healing. We are shaped, and we learn through our shaping what didn't work, what stunted us, what stifled us. And we intentionally shape back to create more space for more life, more expression, more connection. That, for me, is the work of the transitional character in this moment. It's not only absolutely

transforming our family systems but moving beyond to transform *all* the systems in which we're embedded.

I think this is the time for all of us to understand ourselves in this way—that none of us exists as sideline characters or inconsequential beings in whatever it is that we're doing but that we are all transitional characters. And this means our work inside of every system we're in is to understand how to nurture life and creativity and connection inside of those systems—how to take the risks that are necessary, how to push where it's necessary while maintaining connection, how to transform what is necessary.

So, I'm charging you with becoming a transitional character in this moment and choosing to engage in that way. I'm sure that many of you already do, and are transitional characters. It is imperative that we be transitional characters in this moment—you, and me, and all of us. It is imperative that we have the opportunities to build the necessary skills that we need to do the transitional work that we need to do in order to know how to navigate conflict, to be able to be vulnerable with one another, to inspire trust and build trust among each other. This foundational culture work is what will make our movements strong and keep our movements together moving forward.

Lastly, I invite those of you in philanthropy to choose to join us on this journey of being transitional characters, of transforming your own relationships in your own life, and especially in this domain in which you practice, by supporting this work around healing and healing justice and transformation, extending trust and care to your own grantees and also being willing to do this work and to allow this work to be the site of your own healing—of expanding belonging, of increasing reflection—so that we can all grow and transform what is necessary for us to transform in this time. I'll end it there. Thank you so much.

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