

EMERGENT STRATEGY SERIES

WE WILL NOT CANCEL US

  AND OTHER DREAMS OF
TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE.

by **adrienne maree brown**

Afterword by Malkia Devich Cyril

We Will Not Cancel Us acknowledges humanity while inviting us to become more discerning, loving, and rigorous for the sake of collective liberation.

—Charlene A. Carruthers, author of *Unapologetic*

Cancel or call-out culture is a fraught topic these days. Originating as a way for marginalized and disempowered people to address harm and take down powerful abusers, often with the help of social media, it is seen by some as having gone too far. But what is “too far” when you’re talking about imbalances of power and patterns of harm? And what happens when people in social movements direct our righteous anger inward at one another?

In **We Will Not Cancel Us**, movement mediator adrienne maree brown reframes the discussion for us in a way that points to possible paths beyond our impasse. Most critiques of cancel culture come from outside the milieu that produce it, sometimes even from its targets. However, brown explores the question from a Black, queer, and feminist viewpoint that gently asks, how well does this practice serve us? Does it prefigure the sort of world we want to live in? And, if it doesn’t, how do we seek accountability and redress for harm in ways that reflect our values?

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Cover design: Herb Thornay



adrienne maree brown

WE WILL NOT CANCEL US



WE ARE STILL BEGINNING

I've been thinking a lot about transformative justice lately.

In the past few months I've been to a couple of gatherings I was really excited about, and then found myself disappointed, not because drama kicked up, which is inevitable, but because of how we, as participants and organizers and people, handled those dramas.

Simultaneously I've watched several public take-downs, call outs, and other grievances take place on social and mainstream media. Some of those have been of strangers, but recently I've had the experience of seeing people I know and love targeted and taken down. In most cases, very complex realities get watered down into one flawed aspect of these people's personalities, or one mistake or misunderstanding. A mob mentality takes over then, an evisceration of character that is punitive, traumatizing, and isolating.

This has happened with increasing frequency over the past year, such that I'm wondering if those of us

with an intention of transforming the world have a common understanding of the kind of justice we want to practice, now and in the future.

What we do now is find out someone or some group has done (or may have done) something out of alignment with our values. Some of the transgressions are small—saying something fucked-up, being disrespectful in a group process. Some are massive—false identity, sexual assault.

We then tear that person or group to shreds in a way that affirms our values. We create memes, reducing someone to the laughing stock of the Internet that day. We write think-pieces on how we are not like that person, and obviously wouldn't make the same mistakes they have made. We deconstruct them as thinkers, activists, groups, bodies, partners, parents, children—finding all of the contradictions and limitations and shining bright light on them. When we are satisfied that that person or group is destroyed, we move on. Or sometimes we just move on because the next scandal has arrived, the smell of fresh meat overwhelming our interest in finishing the takedown.

I say “we” and “our” intentionally here. I'm not above this behavior. I laugh at the memes, I like the apoplectic statuses, the rants with no named target that very clearly critique a specific person. I've been

examining this—why I can get caught up in a mob on the Internet in a way I rarely do in life (the positive mob mentality I participate in for, say, Beyoncé or Björk feels quite different, though I know there is something in there about belonging...eh, next book). I have noticed that at the most basic level, I feel better about myself because I'm on the right side of history... or at least the news cycle.

But lately, as the attacks grow faster and more vicious, I wonder: is this what we're here for? To cultivate a fear-based adherence to reductive common values? What can this lead to in an imperfect world full of sloppy, complex humans? Is it possible we will call each other out until there's no one left beside us?

I've had tons of conversations with people who, in these moments of public flaying, avoid stepping up on the side of complexity or curiosity because in the back of our minds is the shared unspoken question: when will y'all come for me?

I have also had experiences where I absolutely wanted to take someone down, expose them as a liar, cheater, manipulator, assailant. In each of these situations, time, conversation, and vulnerability have created other possibilities, and I have ended up glad that I didn't go that route, which is generally so short-term in its impact. Sometimes this was because

transformation was possible between us. Sometimes this was because the takedown wouldn't have had the impact I wanted; destroying a person doesn't destroy all of the systems that allow harmful people to do harm. These takedowns make it seem as if massive problems are determined at an individual level, as if these individuals set a course as children to become abusers, misogynists, racists, liars.

How do I hold a systemic analysis and approach when each system I am critical of is peopled, in part, by the same flawed and complex individuals that I love? This question always leads me to self-reflection. If I can see the ways I am perpetuating systemic oppressions, if I can see where I learned the behavior and how hard it is to unlearn it, I start to have more humility as I see the messiness of the communities I am part of, the world I live in.

The places I'm drawn to in movement espouse a desire for transformative justice—justice practices that go all the way to the root of the problem and generate solutions and healing there, such that the conditions that create injustice are transformed.

A lot of people use these words, and yet...we don't really know how to do it.

We call it "transformative justice" when we're throwing knives and insults, exposing each other's worst

mistakes, reducing each other to moments of failure. We call it "holding each other accountable."

I recently reposted these words from Ryan Li Dahlstrom, speaking about this trend in the queer community:

I'm feeling really tired of the call-out culture on social media especially within queer/trans people of color communities. We need to center and build relationships with one another and not keep tearing one another down publicly without trying to have direct conversations. While there are many places of learning, growth, and contradictory practice within the world we live in, why can't we talk to one another directly and allow room for learning from our mistakes or differences? By making these public attacks on each other, we are engaging in the same disposability politics of capitalism and the prison industrial complex that we purport to be against while feeding into state surveillance tactics that are monitoring how we are tearing each other down. Enough is enough y'all. We need each other now more than ever.¹

1 This quote was originally posted on Ryan Li Dahlstrom's Facebook page and is shared with permission.

Yes, Ryan Li, I too am tired of it. But I see it everywhere I turn.

When the response to mistakes, failures, and misunderstandings is emotional, psychological, economic, and physical punishment, we breed a culture of fear, secrecy, and isolation.

So I'm wondering, in a real way: How can we pivot toward practicing transformative justice? How do we shift from individual, interpersonal, and inter-organizational anger toward viable, generative, sustainable systemic change?

In my facilitation and mediation work, I've seen three questions that can help us grow. I offer them here in context with a real longing to hear more responses, to get in deep practice that helps us create conditions conducive to life in our movements and communities.

1. Why? Listen with "Why?" as a framework.

People mess up. We lie, exaggerate, betray, hurt, and abandon each other. When we hear that something bad has happened, it makes sense to feel anger, pain, confusion, and sadness. But to move immediately to punishment means that we stay on the surface of what has happened.

To transform the conditions of the "wrongdoing,"

we have to ask ourselves and each other "Why?" Even—especially—when we are scared of the answer.

It's easy to decide a person or group is shady, evil, psychopathic. The hard truth (hard because there's no quick fix) is that long-term injustice creates most evil behavior. The percentage of psychopaths in the world is just not high enough to justify the ease with which we attempt to label that condition to others.

In my mediations, "Why?" is often the game-changing, possibility-opening question. That's because the answers rehumanize those we feel are perpetrating against us. "Why?" often leads us to grief, abuse, trauma, often undiagnosed mental illnesses like depression or bipolar disorder, difference, socialization, childhood, scarcity, loneliness. Also, "Why?" makes it impossible to ignore that we might be capable of a similar transgression in similar circumstances. We don't want to see that.

Demonizing is more efficient than relinquishing our world views, which is why we have slavery, holocausts, lynchings, and witch trials in our short human history.

"Why?" can be an evolutionary question.

2. Ask yourself/selves: What can I/we learn from this?

I love the pop star Rihanna, not just because she smokes blunts in ball gowns, but because one of her earliest tattoos says, "Never a failure, always a lesson."

If the only thing I can learn from a situation is that some humans do bad things, it's a waste of my precious time—I already know that.

What I want to know is: What can this teach me/us about how to improve our humanity?

What can we learn? In every situation there are lessons that lead to transformation.

3. How can my real-time actions contribute to transforming this situation (versus making it worse)?

This question feels particularly important in the age of social media, where we can make our pain viral before we've even had a chance to feel it. Often we are well down a path of public shaming and punishment before we have any facts about what's happening. That's true of mainstream takedowns, and it's true of interpersonal grievances.

We air our dirt not to each other, but with each other, with hashtags or in specific but nameless rants, to the public, and to those who feed on our weakness and divisions.

We make it less likely to find room for mediation and transformation.

We make less of ourselves.

Again, there are times when that kind of calling out

is the only option—particularly in relation to those of great privilege who are not within our reach.

But if you have each other's phone numbers, or are within two degrees of social-media connection, and particularly if you are in the small, small percentage of humans trying to change the world—you actually have access to transformative justice in real time. Get mediation support, think of the community, move toward justice.

Real time is slower than social-media time, where everything feels urgent. Real time often includes periods of silence, reflection, growth, space, self-forgiveness, processing with loved ones, rest, and responsibility.

Real-time transformation requires stating your needs and setting functional boundaries.

Transformative justice requires us, at minimum, to ask ourselves questions like these before we jump, teeth bared, for the jugular.

I think this is some of the hardest work. It's not about pack hunting an external enemy, it's about deep shifts in our own ways of being.

But if we want to create a world in which conflict and trauma aren't the center of our collective existence, we have to practice something new, ask different questions, access again our curiosity about each other as a species.

And so much more.

I want us to do better. I want to feel like we are responsible for each other's transformation. Not the transformation from vibrant flawed humans to bits of ash, but rather the transformation from broken people and communities to whole ones. I believe transformative justice could yield deeper trust, resilience, and interdependence. All these mass and intimate punishments keep us small and fragile. And right now our movements and the people within them need to be massive and complex and strong.

I want to hear what y'all think, and what you're practicing in the spirit of transformative justice. Towards wholeness and evolution, loves.

WE WILL NOT CANCEL US

We will not cancel us.

We hurt people.

Of course we did, we are human. We were traumatized/socialized away from interdependence. We learned to hide everything real, everything messy, weak, complex. We learned that fake shit hurts, but it's acceptable.

Our swallowed pain made us a piece of shit, or depressed, or untrustworthy, or paranoid, or impotent, or an egomaniac. We moved with the herd, or became isolationist and contrary, perhaps even controversial. We disappointed each other, at the level of race, gender, species...in a vast way we longed for more from us.

But we will not cancel us.

Canceling is punishment, and punishment doesn't stop the cycle of harm, not long term. Cancellation may even be counter-abolitionist... Instead of prison bars we place each other in an overflowing box of untouchables—often with no trial—and strip us of past and

future, of the complexity of being gifted and troubled, brilliant and broken. We will set down this punitive measure and pick each other up, leaving no traumatized person behind.

We will not cancel us. But we must earn our place on this earth.

We will tell each other we hurt people, and who. We will tell each other why, and who hurt us and how. We will tell each other what we will do to heal ourselves, and heal the wounds in our wake. We will be accountable, rigorous in our accountability, all of us unlearning, all of us crawling towards dignity. We will learn to set and hold boundaries, communicate without manipulation, give and receive consent, ask for help, love our shadows without letting them rule our relationships, and remember we are of earth, of miracle, of a whole, of a massive river—love, life, life, love.

We all have work to do. Our work is in the light. We have no perfect moral ground to stand on, shaped as we are by this toxic complex time. We may not have time, or emotional capacity, to walk each path together. We are all flailing in the unknown at the moment, terrified, stretched beyond ourselves, ashamed, realizing the future is in our hands. We must all do our work. Be accountable and go heal, simultaneously, continuously. It's never too late.

We will not cancel us. If we give up this strategy, we will learn together the other strategies that will ultimately help us break these cycles, liberate future generations from the burden of our shared and private pain, leaving nothing unspeakable in our bones, no shame in our dirt.

Each of us is precious. We, together, must break every cycle that makes us forget this.