

Commentary from the Field

# Awareness-Based Systems Change and Racial Justice

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I'm a voting rights lawyer by training, and I left the law because I was disenchanted with legal practice as a mechanism for righting societal wrongs. My African American clients wanted a voice and to be free to shape their own development trajectory, their own future. I worked in the deep South in the US, the place of the former slavery-based agricultural empire that built the wealth of the United States. The idea that Black people wanted to be free was considered an outright insult to the existing power structures. Not just to the institutions: I encountered many White people who took it as a personal affront that Black people intended to be free. That sense of umbrage was excruciating to witness. I realized that despite all of my professional training and efforts, my legal work could not address the underlying cultural and moral disability that human enslavement has wrought in this country. It is a problem of the heart and the spirit that we decide as a nation who matters and who does not; who is within the circle of concern and who is beyond it as a lesser form of humanity. Legal work is an incredibly important part of any effort to make ours a more perfect

union. But, for me, the law was too blunt an instrument for the subtle work of opening people's hearts.

I left the law and, while at MIT Sloan School, I discovered the Presencing Institute's Theory U (Scharmer 2016, 2018), an awareness-based systems change approach. What awareness-based systems change, and Theory U in particular has to offer to social and racial justice work, is a method and tools for opening people's hearts. It offers the invitation to turn the beam of observation back on the self and to view the self and system with an open mind (curiosity), open heart (compassion) and open will (courage). My teacher at Sloan, Otto Scharmer, presented this in a lecture and I immediately knew it could help address the challenges I had been struggling with as a racial justice lawyer.

Many of our political and cultural institutions were created by, rooted in, and built to ensure the mindsets and practices that sustain social violence. And often, debates about the structural roots of racism, give rise to frustration and fear. How can humans transform institutions? But I honestly believe that humans are the only ones that can transform them! I believe that structural violence is actually a series of societal agreements, captured in policies, practices, rules and habits, that collectively we will not pay attention to a set of humans—BIPOC, undocumented, LGBTQ and others—whom we deem less human than ourselves. The way we transform structures then, is to pay attention to people's humanity and to attend to the social circumstances that enliven/legitimate dehumanization or, in the reverse, can cultivate a sense of empathy and care. How can awareness-based systems change help us do this?

First, an awareness-based approach invites us to *look* where we have previously not looked. About the George Floyd murder, my yoga teacher, Brandon Compagnone, told his students that he went online and watched the entire 8 minutes and 46 seconds. He admitted that it was very painful, but that he felt compelled to witness it. "That was my neck; it was your neck. We cannot avert our gaze from the knee on our collective body." So that is the first task now in this moment of racial reckoning in the US and elsewhere: to see, to witness and not look away from the systemic racism and violence that shapes our collective existence.

What has really struck me in this moment is how hungry well-meaning White people are for forgiveness, even as they avert their gaze. I have customarily responded to this hunger with a gesture of comfort and understanding. But, I have come to believe that in addition to being personally exhausting, such gestures actually are not helpful. They divert from the deep look inward, the unsparing inquiry into the source of our opinions and values that is integral to awareness-based systems change. Instead, now I request that White people look at the racialized violence around us. Really see what it is and absorb for themselves what the lack of attention, the dehumanization, does. Forgiveness is not relevant. It is not to say that every White person is guilty, it is to say that you have work to do, and it is not my work. It is your work. It is the work of collectively witnessing and holding this shared trauma that is visited

generation upon generation upon people who are considered less human. To be clear, I have my own work to do in this realm to understand how structural violence has shaped my awareness.

Second, awareness-based systems change invites us to look with an open heart. Elsewhere I have spoken of anger and, in the case of racial injustice, anger plays a role. But anger alone will not resolve what is in front of us. The invitation is to pivot from anger to tenderness. This is excruciatingly hard to do, but absolutely essential. One brings a different kind of attention if anger awakens the need for a tender heart. It is the caring gaze, the listening heart that can shift structures of violence. At the same time, the pivot from anger to tenderness has to be accompanied by an urgent request not to turn away from the suffering but really to allow it to inhabit your heart because that is actually the pathway to tenderness.

Third, awareness-based systems change connects the tender heart to effective action in the world. When you have a rushing train off of which people are constantly being pushed, you cannot just say, “I’ll love the people on the train.” You also have to help stop the train. In the scheme of things, stopping the train is a bit like the task, in the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, of “bending the arc of the moral universe towards justice.” It is massive, multi-layered and multi-generational. It requires all hands aboard; no one is trivial or inconsequential. Sometimes within social justice work, a sensibility among elites is to *reach out to* and *make space at the table for* people who have been marginalized within social systems. This is trivializing and counter-productive.

People who have experienced the sharpest edges of institutional and systems failure are an integral part of those systems; their lived experience gives crucially necessary insights into how systems function and how we collectively might reinvent them. Social and racial justice work is not about creating a space for people who have been marginalized. Connecting the tender heart to effective action is about understanding the urgent need to see from the whole, which cannot exclude anyone, especially people who have been marginalized. The shift in energy from “we are creating a space at our table for you,” to “we are collectively working to see from the whole and address the problems challenging all of us,” is a subtle but significant shift.

Key to awareness-based systems change is the concept of the social field. To me the social field is one way of describing the social context or social body, and I describe it as like a farmer’s field. In any given context in which humans are gathered, whether it is a family, a classroom, a protest or a hospital room, there is communication, there is history, there is habit, there is culture, there are gestures, and all of that is like a farmer’s field. In a farmer’s field there are weeds and rocks and roots and bugs. And what is cultivated is what grows. Understanding that we are existing within a field, and that we have the capacity to cultivate it toward more generative, or more violent outcomes is a powerful leadership tool in racial justice work.

The core practices of awareness-based systems change—deep and empathic listening, cultivating curiosity (open mind), compassion (open heart) and courage (open will) help us to cultivate the social field and help us see from the whole.

Within communities that have confronted structural violence over generations, we use the tools of awareness-based systems change to explore the structures in the community that are generating such unrelenting violence. I am using the term “structural violence” to mean the violence of inattention in governance and policy, as well as the physical violence of police, and of neighbors who have internalized that violence. Structural violence depletes the sense of self, and so turning the beam of observation back is about discovering the impact of this violence on your soul, recognizing it and creating space between you and that beast so as to be able to regenerate your own soul. Turning the beam back on yourself is also about re-affirming your worth as a human being. Practically, this requires space for healing and reflection, a lot of time for check-ins to process ongoing levels of struggle and trauma. The check-ins create a sturdy container of trust and openness.

It is easy to lose track and get discouraged in this work. Reflection and awareness-based practices have helped me to find my North Star, the orienting point that exists at the outer reaches of my gaze but towards which I am always moving. My North Star helps me inhabit that space in the heart of my deepest values that are grounded in humanity. We betray ourselves when we lose confidence in that orientation or when we let ego and doubt cloud our sightline to that path. My North Star also helps me discern the scope of the task ahead, to understand that it is multi-generational, to wrestle with the ways I have internalized structural violence, and to stay focused on the small role that I must play in helping to bend the arc.

I am constantly inquiring into how I might manifest through my own presence the cultivation of a generative space. How might I listen and attend and speak and gesture and regard people in a way that supports empathy and learning and growth and lessens the possibility of damage and harm and violence? Through my silence and observing and listening—and my words and my actions, I am working to shift my own consciousness that sometimes dwells on anger and despair, and to also shift the consciousness in the room. It is not just “if I talk nice I’ll get through this meeting.” It is “if I attend to cultivating this space, collectively we could make extraordinary breakthroughs.” To know that we have that capability within us—and that it is a multiplier power—is itself empowering.

You don’t unmake centuries of injustice and violence by being generative in a room, but you do help the social body in the room become more effective at the thing they are trying to do—beginning to address centuries of injustice and violence. That is the potential of awareness-based systems change. And, for me, it is such a relief. It is such a relief to know that we can have that.

**Dayna Cunningham** is the Dean of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. The only university-wide college of its kind, Tisch College studies and promotes the civic and political engagement of young people at Tufts University, in our communities, and in our democracy. Learn more at: [tischcollege.tufts.edu](http://tischcollege.tufts.edu).

## References

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