

Murmurations: Returning to the Whole

by Adrienne Maree Brown

"What time is it on the clock of the world?"

My mentor Grace Lee Boggs used to ask this question all the time, to anyone who came to visit and learn with her, in any meeting she attended, or speech she gave. She wanted us—her students, comrades, and community—to keep a wide, long lens about our work. To remember, all of the time, that this moment is not the only moment. Human development moves in these massive cycles and phases, and there are always agents of change who ideate and practice and push and grow those shifts. She reminded us that there are changes available to us that are distinct to this time, and she urged us to be present to the opportunities that are current. She knew that we are not individuals simply living these solitary lives in a vacuum; we are the cells of our time-body, the collective physical body of this moment, interacting with each other and the earth and technology in ways that will create an age.

Grace also said, "We must transform ourselves to transform the world," which is taking me years to understand and embody. The way I think of it now is in the framework of the imagination battle: there is a war going on for the future—it is cultural, ideological, economic, and spiritual. And as in any war, there is a front line, a place where the action is urgent, where the battle will be won or lost. The world, the values of the world, are shaped by the choices each of us make. Which means my thinking, my actions, my relationships, and my life create a front line for the possibilities of the entire species. Each one of us is an individual practice ground for what the whole can or cannot do, will or will not do.

Grace visits me with the insistent memory of her words. I see her speaking them with her hands cupping the future in front of her. It's her birthday month, and here she is, spirit teaching.

So I put these two wisdoms in direct relationship with each other more and more often these days: given the time on the clock of the world, how do we need to transform ourselves to transform the world? How do we need to be? How do we need to grow ourselves in order to both spark and cultivate the kinds of species' evolutions we want to see? What do we need to practice?

This, to me, is the work of internal accountability. We are cultivating within ourselves a transformative practice that helps us heal from what the world has been, while generating what the world will be.

We must become accountable to our time, our earth, our species, our people, and our loved ones, from the inside out.

One of the first steps we can take towards generating internal accountability is to develop an assessment of why the world is as it is. This requires us to leap from the uninformed faith we have in the societal myths we were given as children, to the informed faith that we need in order to co-create the real world as adults. This informed faith is based not in cultural myths, but instead in lived experience, political education, and analysis. And this informed faith can allow us to embark on the right assessment, which then helps us find the balance between understanding the systems that have most deeply shaped us, and the responsibility we have over our own lives, choices, and impacts.

We live (and die) inside of systems that were imagined centuries ago by those ambitious and narrow minds of colonists and patriarchs. We live inside the lineage of relatively ignorant imaginations, which were obsessed with protection and domination. But we know so much more now. We know each other's pain and complexity now; we know we are one interconnected ecosystem—so far the only planetary development specifically like us.

Some of us know there is no supremacy amongst us as a species. Some of us know humans aren't meant to be the center of creation. In the same way we had to evolve our thinking from the sun orbiting Earth to the more humbling truth that we are one of many planets orbiting the sun, we must remember (or learn) that the Earth is not designed only for us humans to consume and destroy. We must recognize it is meant to serve all the biodiverse species who walk and fly and swim and form mountains here.

Speaking of other species, my friend Michaela Harrison is a whale singer, who goes down to Brazil, into the water. She sings to the whales, and they sing back, and she feels and listens. And they told her, quite clearly, "We are one," which both deeply resonates with me and challenges me. The idea that I belong to one whole thing sometimes feels too vast.

The fragmentation that has resulted from colonial constructs of race, gender, class, and power has wounded many of us so deeply that we identify more with the wound than with any experience of wholeness or oneness. Because we identify with the wound, we fight against each other over differences that don't need to be battles. We opt in to these constructs, often without conscious choice.

I feel my mind sometimes splitting and labeling my whole self into smaller and smaller boxes because I have always been labeled out of others' boxes. I am tired of hurting and splitting and shrinking myself, and tired of requiring that from anyone else, tired of all the violence required in the denial of self and the denial of biodiversity.

The assessment I form from laying all this knowledge down on a page is that I am accountable for shifting massive systems, and one of the most important ways I can be accountable in the grandest sense is by being intentional and radical in how I behave, what I believe, and what I practice.

A second practice towards internal accountability is to recognize that you have healing to do, given the conditions and legacies you were born into. There is healing related to how your people have suffered, and healing related to how your people have created suffering for others. As a multiracial person, I can immediately reach the healing work needed on both sides of that coin in the family trees that I am aware of. But even for the many of us who cannot access our full history—because our lineage has been lost, stolen, or erased—I would say that an honest assessment would reveal that all of us have caused harm, some of which has been systematized and sustained. And all of us need healing in our lives. Recognize that the healing need is a universal one, and tell yourself the truth

about your parts of that.

Next, identify what healing means to you, what it feels like within you. I believe healing is the victory that actually moves us beyond oppression. And that healing isn't a fixed state, but rather an embodied state that is cultivated with ongoing practice. If you've been developed as a traumatized, numb, selfish, or harmful person, healing is evidenced when, under pressure, you are able to stay connected, stay present, stay interdependent, and be accountable for harm. For me, working with an embodiment framework through a somatic lens has most helped me feel healing, rather than just think about healing. I feel the presence of my healing work when what I feel within is totally aligned with what I am expressing and practicing externally, socially. I know I am in healing dynamics with others when I can fully be myself, without feeling pressure to wound myself with contortion, dishonesty, or overextension. How do you know when you feel healing in yourself, and in your relationships?

Ultimately, internal accountability is about moving from fragility to fortitude, from within. You are not a set of constructs easily destroyed, you are a whole being inside of a whole ecosystem, and you are healing. You can be intentional about directing your energy's flow to the places and memories that will be most healing to the deepest wounds within you. The answer to Grace's question is that now is time to heal our systemic wounds.

For the next piece of this series, we will look at internal accountability in relationship to others.