

Breaking the Cycle of Overwhelm: Building Toward a Just Future Will Require Our Most Grounded Selves

By Laurie Carlsson

I was deep in the struggle we were all feeling back in January - how to make it through each and every day without imploding from anger and heartbreak - when I heard Sam Sanders say something brilliant. On an episode of the podcast [Vibe Check](#) he talked about spending his outrage with discernment. "I've been trying to think of my outrage and anger as a bank account with money in there that I can spend...my outrage is precious and I wanna use it in the best way that I can." I was grateful for a concrete metaphor I could hold onto, one that felt both instructive and grounding.

Around that same time, I was having a similar conversation over and over with social justice advocates, in response to the administration's flurry of executive orders. "This is their strategy - they're trying to overwhelm us!" we all said. In late January, The Atlantic published a more [detailed version](#) of this theory. We were clear that these were the tactics at play, that those who seek to tear down and divide are looking to overwhelm us with the sheer volume of daily chaos, but we were still sitting there smack in the middle of it - scrolling, panicking, and feeling helpless. And as the defunding, persecuting, disappearing, and unraveling continue we're still there - frozen and exhausted. Everyone sees the storm we're enveloped in, but no one can seem to find an exit route.

In short, what they're doing is working. The volume of unjust actions and straight-up atrocities committed by this administration is meant to envelop us in fear - to be so afraid for ourselves and our families that we aren't able to come together and fight. They're using a strategy that relies on our complicity and we can't for the life of us figure out how ***not*** to provide it. It's not that we don't know what's at stake here. But with our nervous systems constantly on fire, we are ceding ground on many fronts. To change course, we must first understand where we are. How is fear fueling our inertia, and how powerful could our response be with some solid ground under our feet?

Fear is keeping us quiet when we need to be loud. DEI, or Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, have become shorthand for efforts to ensure that throughout our society everyone is included and has what they need to be successful, particularly those who have been pushed outside of the [Circle of Human Concern](#). Our language matters, and the rhetoric of those in power right now is nothing short of an Orwellian dystopia, where the three official slogans of the party in power were "War Is Peace; Freedom Is Slavery; Ignorance Is Strength." The very folks bemoaning the rise of DEI hiring practices are themselves just that. These individuals have continued to fail forward because of their racial and gender identity (white and male). Ira Katznelson details the extensive ways in which white people have been given preferential treatment for centuries in his

acclaimed book *When Affirmative Action was White*¹. Similar works could be written about the preferential treatment that heterosexual individuals and cisgender men have been given throughout our country's history. Then there's the fact that every member of this administration is *woefully* underqualified for the job they currently hold – the very thing they allege against so-called “DEI Hires.” We've seen the illusion of the right's “merit-based” hiring in the weekly [parade of incompetence](#), a step beyond the white male mediocrity Ijeoma Oluo details in her book [Mediocre](#). These are the counternarratives we need to be sharing at every turn.

We also need to be talking not just about what DEI is *not* but what it *is*, and why it's important. Instead of watering down our language for fear of legal or funding ramifications or merely refuting the claims that DEI is somehow unfair or illegal, we must paint a vision of what a diverse, equitable, and inclusive society looks like. JustLead's [REJI Commitments](#) implore us to “Ensure our organizations invest in active, ongoing learning that will teach us to see, reveal, and transform structures that create racialized outcomes and push communities of color outside the circle of human concern.” How on earth can we see, reveal, and transform, if we can't be brave enough to clearly name the injustices we're seeing?

For those tempted to downplay the importance of words in building toward a more just world, I want to revisit the power that intentional language can have. Words give voice to our struggles and allow us to dream together of a different future. Our movements have felt the power of naming countless times before - in the ever-evolving language of identity that allows us each to choose who we belong to; in the solidarity contained in the five simple letters of “me too;” and most certainly in the obvious, yet necessary declaration that Black Lives Matter. It's more important now than ever before to be loud about what diversity, equity, and inclusion actually mean - among my favorites: “[Definitely Earned It](#).” Those of us who have walked the uphill battle of succeeding in a society that seeks to oppress us know the truth - that we have had to be at least three times better than our dominant culture colleagues to arrive at the same place. When the language of DEI is mischaracterized, and we say nothing, we allow opponents of equity and justice to erase that truth from our collective consciousness. As Rebecca Solnit has opined, “Once we call it by name, we can start having a real conversation about our priorities and values².”

For a lesson on the impacts of allowing our movement concepts to be coopted, take the term “Identity Politics,” coined by activists in the [Combahee River Collective](#) in the 1970s. In a 2018 interview,³ activist Beverly Smith describes the term this way: “What we were saying is that we have a right as people who are not just female, who are not solely Black, who are not just lesbians, who are not just working class, or workers – that we are people who embody all of these identities, and we have a right to build and define political theory and practice based upon that reality.” Fast forward forty years and the term is used not to describe the inclusion of black lesbian working-class women in our society, but to describe the *exclusion* of those who have historically had *the most* access to power. When white, cisgender, hetero men take part in politics

¹ Katznelson, I. (2005). *Real Self-Care (Crystals, Cleanses, and Bubble Baths Not Included)* (1st ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

²Solnit, R. (2018). *Call Them by Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)* (1st ed., p. 4). Haymarket Books.

³ Taylor, K. Y. (2018). *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (1st ed., p. 61). Haymarket Books.

that benefit *them* (see “merit-based” hiring above), we don’t call it identity politics. Why not? Because white, male and hetero are the default. They are the “normal” to everyone else’s “other.” They are the identity that someone referred to as the “diverse candidate” is diverging from. To add insult to injury, the left has taken the cooptation of the term a step further, using it to police anyone who dares to reach for liberatory policies, for fear of alienating those in the center.

There are certainly legitimate critiques of DEI as a strategy, particularly those that claim it’s often used to uphold the status quo, while giving the appearance of equity and justice. There are robust and important conversations to be had about the limits of a DEI framework. But when we abandon these concepts out of fear, we’re ceding the footing that these terms have helped our movement gain. This is quite simply not a strong place to build from. Allowing the right to continue rebranding our movement language isn’t just squandering an opportunity to vision a better future; it’s allowing opponents of justice to use our own tools to reverse our progress and bring us back to a time where exclusion was not only allowed but heralded.

Fear is drawing us toward zero-sum narratives. These are the assumptions that lead us to throw marginalized groups under the bus in the name of achieving progress. (See use of the term “identity politics” to police the amount of progress we’re fighting for). For instance, some prominent Democrats have [spoken out against trans girls’](#) right to take part in school sports, in the name of not pushing the envelope too far. This is a page straight from the [White Supremacy Culture](#) playbook, as Tema Okun details in her work on the divisive nature of fear. Those in power need us to see the liberation of others as a threat to our own. Otherwise, how would power remain in the hands of a small minority of white, cisgender, rich, heterosexual men, while the majority of individuals in the US (not to mention the vast global majority) fight to survive a system that deprives us of the most basic needs - housing, food, healthcare, wellness. Creating the next coalition for justice will require us to remember that it is White Supremacy that takes up all the air in the room, all the time and space, all the money and resources. We have the power to change this, but we can only do it together. And if we continue to let our fear of not getting what we need lead our actions, we won’t get there.

Fear is increasing our need for control. What we’ve seen in some of our client organizations since January is a doubling down on rigid hierarchical structures, enforcing [one right way](#) of doing things, and maintaining the status quo at all costs. The overwhelm and fear of those in leadership is causing them to hold onto control with an even tighter grasp than before. These are very human reactions to fear. I won’t lie - if I could bubble wrap my children and forbid them from ever leaving the house, I might be tempted to do it. But if we are serious about walking our society back from the edge of authoritarianism and building something beautiful together, we must figure out how to find some footing underneath us and find an alternative to battening down the hatches. Working together to build the kind of world we want demands strong collaboration skills: deep listening, humility, and emotion regulation among them. This kind of openness requires a reckoning with the natural fear responses that keep us in defensive mode and closed to new ways of being.

Fear is causing those of us with privilege to confuse discomfort with danger. I won’t pretend to be blasé about being a DEI practitioner during this fraught time. But are the stakes actually

high for those of us doubling down on equity and justice efforts? The answer to this is likely linked to how much privilege our intersecting identities afford us. The risks for those with intersecting marginalized identities are simply greater. As we are making decisions about balancing visibility and safety, it's important that we investigate those feelings of danger. As is often the case when someone tells a white person (like me) that we've done or said something racist, our nervous system may tell us that we're in danger when we're actually uncomfortable. It was easy to be brave when DEI was all the rage - back in 2020 when the murder of George Floyd had everyone lining up to add antiracism statements to their websites and anti-bias trainings to their staff retreats. It's harder now, when the tides have changed and real consequences are being felt by many. For those who carry some amount of privilege (straight, white, cisgender, male, etc.), are we asking ourselves 'what are the acceptable risks?' And are we remembering to include in our risk assessment the impacts of *not* speaking up? Can we tolerate the discomfort of pushing back on the system in order to give our Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), Women of Color, Nonbinary, and Transgender colleagues a break?

So, how exactly do we escape from the eye of the storm, untie from our deepest fears, and begin to rebuild?

You've likely heard the term "fight or flight." If you're part of the JustLead community, you may even be aware of the more encompassing term "Core Embodied Coping Mechanisms," a framework that adds freeze, appease, and dissociate (hello, Netflix and nachos!) to the list of ways we show up when our nervous system senses danger. When our bodies respond to fear in this way, our sympathetic nervous system takes over and we are very suddenly disconnected from the parts of our brain that help us to listen critically, empathize with others, and develop reasoned responses to threats. When our nervous system is sensing constant threats - say from a barrage of executive orders that threaten the wellbeing of ourselves and those we care about - we are steeping our system in a cortisol stew all day every day.

Many of us *are* at risk in some way. I am deeply afraid for my girls, who will eventually live in this world as Women of Color (or however they choose to identify). Is there any fear more primal than the welfare of our children can provoke? The kind of safety I will seek though, if I let my amygdala run the show, is not going to allow for my bravest self to show up. It's also not going to allow me to remember that there are families in my community who are at greater risk than ours; trans kids experiencing violence and exclusion, immigrant families facing separation through deportation, and families struggling to maintain steady housing and food sources, among other deep challenges.

We have a lot of work to do right now. What could be possible if we were able to sit with and work through our fear and overwhelm enough to step bravely into the work at hand? Perhaps you already have well-worn strategies for moving through your fear. In case you don't, here are some of my favorite tactics for remaining connected to my thinking brain:

- **Snooze vs scroll:** Study after study shows the importance of good sleep for brain function and emotion regulation. If we're choosing to inundate ourselves with information that hits our rage buttons instead of getting the rest we need, we're setting ourselves up for

exhaustion and fear paralysis.

- **Build Good News Hygiene:** The right kind and level of news intake will be different for everyone. The important thing is that you're in choice about it, and aware of how your choices are impacting your nervous system. Choose a couple of trusted news sources and schedule your consumption. Turn off news alerts and communicate your news boundaries to friends and loved ones so they're not texting you the latest at all hours of the night.
- **Connect to Your Values:** In one of the most dog-eared books I own - *Real Self Care*⁴ (Crystals, Cleanses, and Bubble Baths not included) - Pooja Lakshmin talks about the wellness benefits of untying from the "shoulds" in our lives. She points out that "It's only when your life is out of alignment with your values that you end up conflicted, miserable, and unable to stop yourself from binge-watching five episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*." Being intentional in a way that ties to your own values can be *truly* energizing.
- **Move your Body:** Emily and Amelia Nagoski talk about the importance of "completing the stress cycle" in their excellent book *Burnout*. "Physical activity is what tells your brain you have successfully survived the threat and now your body is a safe place to live." Some [studies herald the benefits of a mere 12 minutes of exercise](#) per day. Extra points for moving your body while connecting with a friend or feasting your eyes on some nature.

If there was any time to truly untie from the late-stage capitalism that has us working overtime to be the perfect parent, perfect child, and perfect employee, that time is now. There is no room for our own wellness in most of the lives we lead today. But the cost of remaining ensconced in fear and overwhelm is just too high. We have to choose something different. Many of the opposition's tactics can only be successful with our help. Let's not lend them a hand and allow ourselves to be overwhelmed into submission.

There are truly so many reasons to be afraid right now. But what becomes possible when we are able to move through our fear reactions and respond to the current moment from a place of grounded-ness instead? The kind of dreaming and building the current moment demands is only possible when we come together as our most centered selves. As the saying goes, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgement that something else is more important than fear." What is more important than fear to *you*? And what are you willing to do to prioritize it?

⁴ Lakshmin, P. (2023). *Real Self-Care (Crystals, Cleanses, and Bubble Baths Not Included)* (1st ed., p. 172). Penguin Random House.