

# Hellbender

Issue #3

A periodical of anarchist ideas, stories, art and fun.

## *I Don't Understand Your Silver Spoon*

By: b

"It's like you're the only anarchist in the room who doesn't know which side the salad fork goes on."

-my partner's words to me while we were talking about intellectualism in the "anarchist community."

For years I've known I'm in the minority, to a degree, as a person in anarchist organizing/community/mindset.

I grew up in poverty in appalachia, in a severely abusive home (scenes in the movie "the burning bed" were all too familiar). Both my parents were factory workers until my dad committed suicide by bullet at work and my mom became disabled from soldering motherboards for 20 years. I grew up sleeping in the living room with my brother, my mom, and her boyfriend in the winters because that room was insulated (i'll never forget the smell of kerosene). We all shared bath water to save money on the water bill. Teeth were busted out over leaving light switches on. It was common to see the neighbors beating their girlfriends, so I never realized that my situation was different than most peoples. Unlike most people, family was never safe or reliable for me.

After my dad died I became more morose as a person. I began dying my hair black and listening to punk music. I loved going to shows. It was the only place I didn't feel weird or alone. It felt like church must feel like to most christians. Some sort of thing where you feel totally free and full of joy and

satisfaction, and a sense of connectedness with everyone around you. That was my experience anyway. Post punk made me look up words I never knew in dictionaries so that I could better understand what they were talking about. The dead kennedys helped me pass a test (pol pot!) Nofx caused me to TRY to read noam chomsky. Punk music made me realize that there was a name for how I thought/felt. I guess i'm an anarchist.

I started working when I was 14. The first of what I can imagine has been close to a hundred jobs at this point (i'm 40) was working for Hardees as a drive through cashier. I was pumped because it meant I could eat more often. It also meant I could start helping my mom pay bills. As has been the case for most of my life, I only lasted at that job a few months before I moved on to papa johns, and then eventually harris teeter where I began working close to 35 hours a week, on top of going to high school.

I used to skip school and go read up on the mountain while listening to music in my car. The thing that made me finally drop out of school (besides needing to work full time) was reading "a peoples history of the united states." I knew I didn't like authority. I knew that I wanted to follow my own codes, not someone elses. I knew I didn't have reverence for people who were classier than me. I knew that my teachers were hypocrites and more interested in dominating than providing a quality education. I knew I hated having a job, but didn't mind work. How many times I was actually told that I wouldn't go anywhere in life by my teachers... Anyway, reading that book made me realize that I could learn more about what I actually wanted to learn about on my

own than I ever could at school. So I quit.

I got my GED when I was 19.

I never went to college.

I was 22 when I read "Days of war nights of love." It caused me to quit my job, dumpster most of my food at the time, daydream about a different possibility, and finally summed up most of how I think and feel. I felt understood to a degree. I like crimethinc and how they introduce anarchist ideas. I do think people need to progress beyond "if you're homeless and not having fun, you're not doing it right" though. But the best thing that book did for me was solidify an idea.

**IF YOU CANT CONVEY IDEAS IN A SIMPLE WAY THEN YOUR IDEAS ARE BULLSHIT.**

Often times in anarchist spaces, I am one of few, if not the only person in the room who grew up in abject poverty, I am usually the only high school drop out. Ive usually been homeless more than most people in those spaces. I don't use words that are as big or alienating as most people either. Most of the other people who share a similar experience to me usually don't hang around in these spaces for too long and I feeeeeeel it.

I never really got out of poverty. I have no career. I've worked shit ass jobs my whole life, the longest stint being about 3 years at some convenience store. I have no savings at all, and will likely be homeless again before I die (which fucking sucks. Eat it crimethinc). I don't have a family to call for bail money when I get caught up. I don't have the money to buy shit to bloc up in and discard. (first black bloc I was ever a part of, I didn't know that folks

sometimes debloc by throwing their shit away, so when everyone starting taking off their clothes and throwing them on the street as they were running from the pigs, i'm running behind them grabbing shit off the ground. "New bookbag, score! Shoes I can sell, score! A new jacket, score!")

I don't have the education to be interested in some philosopher who's going to tell me what I already know, in words that make me feel stupid.

I don't know why i'm writing this to be honest. I guess I just want y'all to be thinking about how you communicate in these spaces. Can someone who cant read understand what you're saying? If not, why? Do you use the language you use to elevate yourself above others, or to feel superior? Because that's how you come off to those of us who had no other choice than to have these politics.

I'm tired of book readers who make me feel like shit. I want doers who don't have some cushy family experience to fall back on.

To me, being an anarchist isn't something that I chose to be because I read a book. Its something that I am, inherently. I'm not against people finding the language for what they are. I just don't want them to be dissuaded by the words that are used.



## Indigenous Anarchic Society

By: Eepa

What is hierarchy outside of the European anarchist cosmology? Hierarchy is something that is often overlooked among Indigenous anarchics, but is essential for understanding social relations in Indigenous cosmologies. These forms of hierarchy are not based in the same relations and need to have broader discussion among Indigenous anarchics as we move forward outside of European political paradigms.

### Indigenous Historical & Cultural Understandings of Hierarchy

It is possible to characterize positions of hierarchy within some Indigenous systems as hierarchies based on respect, not domination. People may hold a position as 'chief' in a hierarchy that encourages people to follow their guidance, but there is no mechanism to enforce obedience or observance of these leaders' ideas.

Caribs/Kalinago would never abide an order to go fishing, but at the suggestion that fish was needed by the chief, people would join him in fishing. Among Yuman tribes, chiefs & orators would lead in offering suggestions for activities, but mutual consent was required for action. In another instance of this among a Yuman tribe, the Kwapa war parties could only be successful if the person urging the military action could convince people to join him in combat.

Looking at my people, the Kwapas, we see select forms of respect-based leaders serving in different roles. The most prominent was the chief, who acted as the unitor and coordinator for the entire tribe. It was his responsibility to gather people together for funerals, for deliberations of justice, for trade, and for diplomatic discussions with foreign emissaries. Kwapa chiefs usually came from a family line, but this was not always the case. Patrilineal chiefs arose largely because the son of a chief was expected to learn from his father, to participate in his father's duties, and to prepare to one day lead with wisdom. This usually worked, but in cases where the son wasn't able or willing to provide wise leadership, another person who held the community's respect would take up the mantle. Orators followed a similar tradition to chiefs, passing from father to worthy son or too another man who had the respect & knowledge to fill the role. Orators provided spoken wisdom. Orators would be present in each village, getting on the roof of a

home/ramada each day to tell stories that were relevant to social conditions on that given day. They taught ethics, morality, and some aspects of spirituality. Often a respected man without the oral wisdom of an orator would act as a capitan, helping lead the logistics and cooperative labor for a village/clan in daily activities.

Another positions for leadership was only active during times of war. The kwinemi (war chief) was selected by all Kwapa people, men & women, at a general meeting. His selection was based on his oration, his dreams for how to accomplish the war. A previous kwinemi could not appoint a new leader; this was seen as a community decision because it involved the lives of so many families, and might invoke retribution on the entirety of the tribe. Once selected, a kwinemi would lead through the entire battle, unless incapacitated, at which time a new leader would spontaneously arise, usually from the ranks of the experienced warriors. Secondary, were the ! akwil bakas (feathered lance warriors) who had demonstrated great courage and carried with them great experience, who carried only a double pointed feathered lance. The tertiary fighters of less experience would be shield warriors and archers, divided based upon personal preference for weapon and the needs of the campaign.

With these hierarchies, we see that leaders are given preferential 'authorities' to suggest actions, but no authority to compel it. This authority hinges on respect, with a person being demoted from their position in the hierarchy, without ceremony, when people lose respect.

Hierarchies within these communities were not solely based on respect; domination-based hierarchy existed, particularly with regard to women, children, and slaves. With respect to the Kwapa, Women were given autonomy over their choice of partner and could leave a non-providing partner at will. Women, however, were historically denied opportunities to lead or to craft an identity independent of a man. All leaders were men and women all had the same name, with specific women being referenced by which mans home she lived in. With the exception of trans men, there was no option in this. This was the first way that hierarchy and domination manifested in Kwapa culture.

Kwapas also took kwabayau (slaves) in battle and would trade them for goods with neighboring tribes. The master-slave relationship in Kwapa society was markedly different than that of western chattel slavery. Kwabayau were often adopted into families and were expected to act as Kwapas. Some, especially those

captured in revenge battles, were subject to abuse. Children born to captured Kwabayau were considered free and full members of the tribe and would be treated as such. This was the second way that hierarchy and domination manifested in Kwapa culture.

One culture we can look to too for an almost complete absence of hierarchy is the Hadza people of West Africa. The Hadza have a simple solution to those who feel they have the right to control others. They pack up camp and leave them behind. They do this until the person stops attempting to control them. In Hadza culture everyone is one the same level of a respect based hierarchy, in that a person can only fall from grace, not aspire to it.

### Anarchist Historical & Cultural Understandings of Hierarchy

Anarchy & Anarchism take their name from the Greek root anarchos, broken down to its roots- an meaning without and archos meaning ruler. Without-ruler has differing interpretations, the most rigid being the absolute destruction of hierarchy. This has led many Indigenous communities to steer clear of defining themselves under the rigid definition used by some to be anarchism, an ideological dogma that pushes aside material and spiritual realities of our peoples. Rigid and often European centered interpretations of anarchy/anarchism do have variations within them: herein we will briefly explore

For the absolutist position on hierarchy, we can look to a contemporary writing in Anarchy Vs. Archy: No Justified Authority Or Why Chomsky Is Wrong by Ziq. The author expresses the position that anarchy is not defined as the absence of rulers, but specifically states that "Hierarchies exist for rulers to maintain their social control & power over the population. This control is maintained with violent force by authorities appointed by the rulers: the army, national guard, police, courts, prisons, social workers, the media, tax collectors, etc." While Ziq makes allowances for services and advisement by specialists, they fail to acknowledge the deference between respect based hierarchies (such as the deference to specialists) and the coercive hierarchies with their machinations to maintain coercive power.

Edwin Hammer analyzed hierarchy as manifest in the role-playing needed to allow hierarchies to exist. They write:

"The role mediates authenticity, preventing the experience of directly lived life. One does not

experience any particular generalized activity, one experiences the responsibilities and duties demanded by one's role in that activity. If at times it appears social life permits individuals to transcend their roles, this is merely the assumption, the animation of another preexisting role, or perhaps even the creation of a new role, but it is not transcendence at all. It is a new context, a replacement into the hierarchically structured enterprises that predominate: a new role, with new, specialized duties, and the power to execute those tasks or ensure their accomplishment."

Ever shifting roles allow us to delegate of parts of our existence for others to perform or oversee. This analysis of hierarchy strikes more deeply at both respect based and domination based hierarchies as a fragmentation of the self.

Murry Boockchin understood oppressive hierarchy as centralized in domination. He argued against much of the European left's incorrect analysis that domination-based hierarchy arose from a desire to free ourselves from the 'domination of nature.' Indigenous people have long laughed at these assertions by Marx and others. It has always been deeply alienating. Bookchin calls it out with an understanding we can appreciate as Indigenous people:

"However much the writings of liberals and Marx convey the belief that attempts to dominate nature "led" to the domination of human by human, no such "project" ever existed in the annals of what we call "history." At no time in the history of humanity did the oppressed of any period joyfully accede to their oppression in a starry-eyed belief that their misery would ultimately confer a state of blissful freedom from the "domination of nature" to their descendants in some future era."

He also wrote,

"Domination of human by human did not arise because people created a socially oppressive "mechanism" — be it Marx's class structures or Lewis Mumford's human-constructed "mega-machine" in order to "free" themselves from the "domination by nature." It is exactly this very queasy idea that gave rise to the myth that the domination of nature "requires," "presupposes," or "involves" the domination of human by human."

Bookchin generalizes some of the conceptions of hierarchy and property in Indigenous societies, but does note that outside of European or similarly feudal societies globally, Indigenous people generally did conceive of nature literally permeating "the

community not only as a providential environment, but as the blood flow of the kinship tie that united human to human and generation to generation.” The connection to land & nature often coexists with respect-based hierarchies but also can exist in domination-based hierarchies.

### Western Academics’ Understandings of Hierarchy

Western academics have noted the difference between hierarchies and have attempted to test and quantify. They state that certain hierarchies are based in domination are inherently based in ‘rule,’ the ability to enact domination to ensure compliance. This social structure, also seen in some Indigenous systems, is a hierarchy that relies not on mutual consent/respect, but on domination /competition.

Dominance and Prestige are used in some psychological literature to explain the differences between these already extant Indigenous systems (Cheng et al, 2012). These have been competing models for how hierarchies are established and maintained. Similar language can be seen with “selfish or servant” leadership where selfish leaders act to empower themselves and allies at the cost of the greater community (Gillet et al, 2011). Servant leaders are seen to act out of empathy and a sense of duty to the community, often taking a broader perspective than just those of the narrowly interested parties. As Cheng discussed, these both can exist within the same systems, something that we as anarchic Indigenous people are eager to change, expelling dominance-based leadership and hierarchy mobilities and building systems that rely on respect (academically known as prestige or servant hierarchies).

### A Vision for Indigenous Anarchic Hierarchy & De-Hierarchy Moving Forward

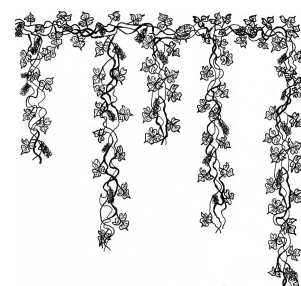
We as anarchic Indigenous people, oppose domination-based hierarchy, rejecting it entirely as self-serving and to the detriment of everyone in the community. Mutual consent & respect are essential. Domination must never be used against others in our communities to enact compliance. Indigenous systems, like those seen in the Mayan communities who have helped build the governance systems of the Zapatistas, provide a way forward, safeguarding against domination.

We must drive out domination-based hierarchies. Who is a man to coerce a woman to do anything? Abolish Patriarchy. Who is a woman to coerce a woman to do anything? Abolish domination. Who is a light skinned person to coerce a dark skin person to do anything? Abolish anti-Blackness and colorism. Some








of these things are deeply rooted in parts of our cultures. It may be painful for some to see these changes, but we must act towards equity within our Indigenous societies if we are ever to escape the workings of self-centered rulers. Free from internal domination, we can finally unite in an effective fight against colonial domination and capitalist domination. Indigenous people can find strength in our spirituality. We must discover our spirituality for ourselves and remember that colonizers have tainted some of our spiritual practices. Equally, some of our spiritual practices may have been developed as a means of enforcing domination-based hierarchies. With open eyes and loving hearts, we can lay these truths bare, building from what we find, spiritualities that are true to our ancestors and true to the generations that shall come.

We can find strength in respect, mutual cooperation, and leadership from those who hold no coercive power. We must be equally ready to build systems in our societies to root out self-serving people who use acts of domination to achieve their goals. No matter the goals of the community, domination is not to be used as a tool used to plant revolution by so-called Indigenous revolutionary leaders. That is a dangerous path that which wash away with the first hard rains, into authoritarianism.

Indigenous anarchic futures are ours to create. They will be different, without a doubt, from Indigenous society to Indigenous society; our cultures, both as they are and as they will be, reflect our lands, our experiences, our struggles, and how we wish to shape our existences in the future. All colonized people have lost so much, but with what we have left, we can start anew. We can learn from each other, we can share, we can build new networks of relations and trade to replace those that were destroyed. Without centralization we can unite in material and intellectual solidary. With the wisdom of our ancestors and living kin today, Africa, Americas, Australia, Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Arctic, and Asia can unite in cooperative, decentralized struggle. What hierarchies provide us with benefits? How have other people lived without domination? Look around the world; Indigenous people have answers.



## IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN FOR EVERYONE'S FAVORITE GAME... MAY DAY BINGO. HERE'S A 2021 VERSION YOU CAN AND SHOULD PLAY WITH ALL OF YOUR FAVORITE ACCOMPLICES. ENJOY!

	B	I	N	G	O
1	 <b>GRAFFITI</b>	<b>ATTACK A SYMBOL OF THE STATE</b>	 <b>STEAL A FLAG</b>	<b>SABOTAGE PARKING METER OR TRANSIT KIOSK</b>	<b>MAKE A ZINE</b>
2	<b>STEAL FROM YOUR JOB</b>	<b>ATTACK A NEW CONDO</b>	Uplift a Friend	<b>GIVE MONEY TO A PRISONER</b>	<b>VANDALIZE A BREWERY</b>
3	<b>WRITE A LETTER TO A PRISONER</b>	 <b>MOON A TOURIST</b>	<b>FREE SQUARE</b> <i>(Happy May Day)</i>	<b>BANNER DROP</b>	 <b>SABOTAGE SECURITY CAMERAS</b>
4	 <b>DUMPSTER FIRE</b>	<b>PRISON SOLIDARITY ACTION</b>	 <b>HACK SOMETHING</b>	<b>STEAL FROM JEFF BEZOS</b>	<b>PHONE ZAP</b>
5	<b>HELP OUT SOMEONE PANHANDLING</b>	<b>FUCK WITH A FASCIST</b>	<b>BILLBOARD IMPROVEMENT</b>	<b>TAKE A DAY OFF</b>	 <b>ATTACK A LUXURY CAR</b>

P.S. Feel free to send anonymous reportbacks to us to keep tallies for your respective cities/towns as we approach May Day. Always wipe metadata, keep your security culture tight, and have fun.

Ode to the Orwed

By: J."g."J.

Unlike a jingo-boo, who  
(with all the humility of a \$400 headband)  
gets on Af-Am radio  
and says nothing about reparations,  
I no longer wish to be humxn.  
I want the respect given cops and corporations.  
Bail outs and paid vacations  
for every housing crisis and extra-judicial homicide.  
If techbro erections and lotto addictions  
yield trillions and billions (respectively),  
surely every descendant of the enslaved Afrikan  
can get 40 adjusted-for-inflation acres  
and the COVID-era equivalent of a mule.

In an effort to replace "tyranny" with autocracy  
Disease-spreading legals took a break from fetus-worship  
to make poopies in the Capitol.  
they're gonna need to find those missing kid gloves to clean it up  
'cuz the Trail of Tears and Natchez Trace  
ain't got shit on the rape of them hallowed halls!

Now an Indian, a Caribbean and a womxn walk into a bar...exam  
and give Clint Eastwood a bleeding-heart transplant,  
and everything is normal as deportation and forced sterilization  
and half-assed sorries for queer lobotomies.  
[Hey, they Made the Military Trans Again  
and promise LGBTQ-only correctional facilities (if you're lucky!)]  
The oligarchy has the most hyphenated draft picks  
in almost 300 years!  
Fuck self-determination, and independent homeland,  
when you can play a slot machine  
every four years  
that dispenses ALL the responsibility  
for a snuff movie called a "country"  
and NONE of the power.

The cry "terrorist" when we turn the other cheek,  
what if we gave 'em something to cry about?  
If I turn the long, hard road to democracy  
into a (Boston) marathon  
would I be loved like the Confederacy?  
This republic is a pressure cooker,  
we need some balls (bearing), (tough as) nails  
and Black Pow(d)er, to add up to an IOU  
long overdue (and spelled IED).  
[carried / concealed by chameleons,  
and placed between both sets of klan  
on some "January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021" kinda day]  
It would make more noise  
than the thirteen lynchings under Trump last year  
or, even worse, the stolen computer  
of Nancy Pelosi ("He put his feet on my DESK!!!")  
and it would actually do some good...

Epilogue: Remember when the anarchists used to rob banks, bomb buildings and kill politicians and police? Neither do I...

Dedicated to Queen Mother Audley Moore and Renzo Novatore

After the Pandemic, We Can't Go Back to Sleep

By: David Graeber

At some point in the next few months, the crisis will be declared over, and we will be able to return to our "nonessential" jobs. For many, this will be like waking from a dream.

The media and political classes will definitely encourage us to think of it this way. This is what happened after the 2008 financial crash. There was a brief moment of questioning. (What is "finance," anyway? Isn't it just other people's debts? What is money? Is it just debt, too? What's debt? Isn't it just a promise? If money and debt are just a collection of promises we make to each other, then couldn't we just as easily make different ones?) The window was almost instantly shut by those insisting we shut up, stop thinking, and get back to work, or at least start looking for it.

Last time, most of us fell for it. This time, it is critical that we do not.

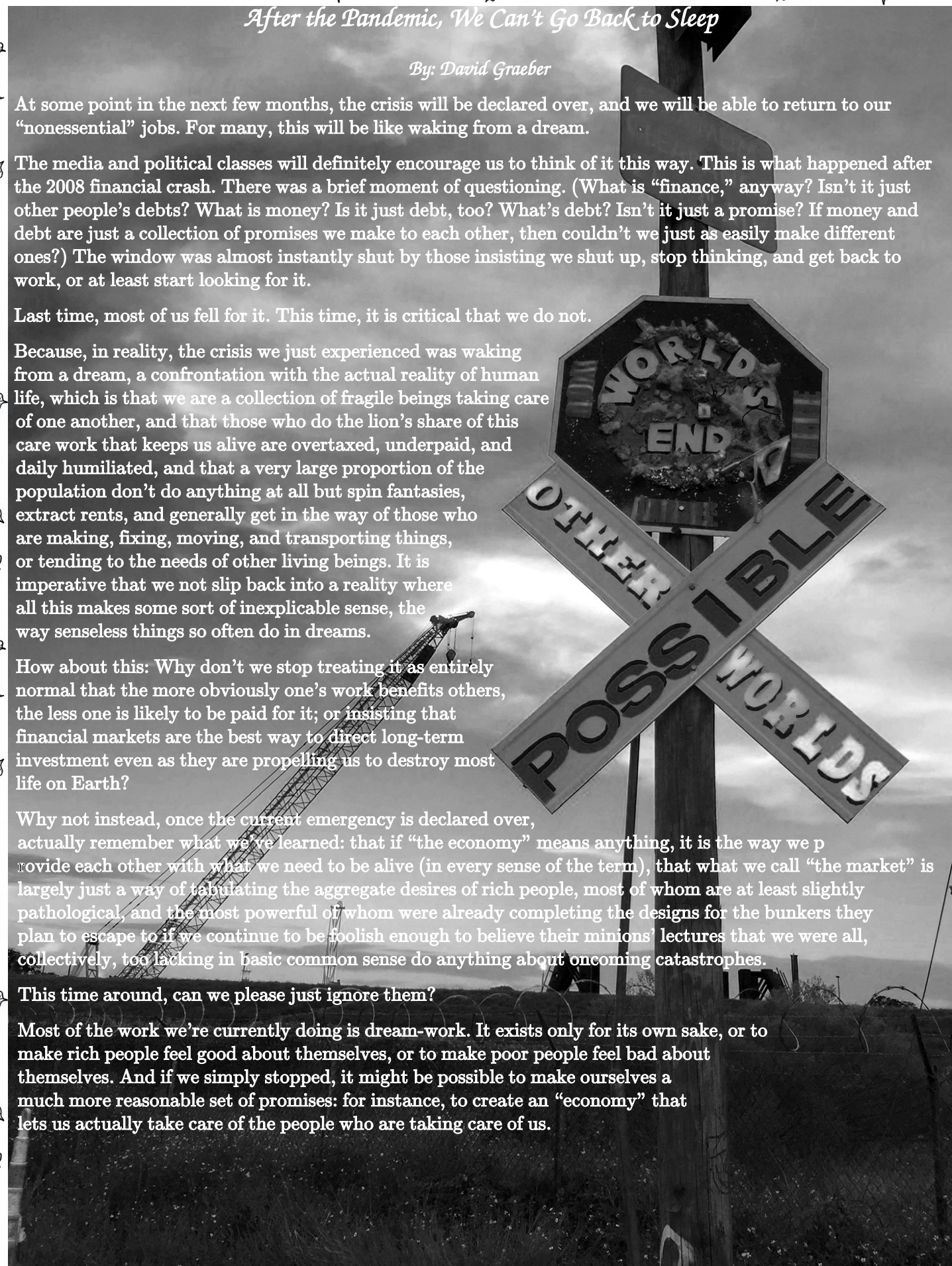
Because, in reality, the crisis we just experienced was waking from a dream, a confrontation with the actual reality of human life, which is that we are a collection of fragile beings taking care of one another, and that those who do the lion's share of this care work that keeps us alive are overtaxed, underpaid, and daily humiliated, and that a very large proportion of the population don't do anything at all but spin fantasies, extract rents, and generally get in the way of those who are making, fixing, moving, and transporting things, or tending to the needs of other living beings. It is imperative that we not slip back into a reality where all this makes some sort of inexplicable sense, the way senseless things so often do in dreams.

How about this: Why don't we stop treating it as entirely normal that the more obviously one's work benefits others, the less one is likely to be paid for it; or insisting that financial markets are the best way to direct long-term investment even as they are propelling us to destroy most life on Earth?

Why not instead, once the current emergency is declared over, actually remember what we've learned: that if "the economy" means anything, it is the way we provide each other with what we need to be alive (in every sense of the term), that what we call "the market" is largely just a way of tabulating the aggregate desires of rich people, most of whom are at least slightly pathological, and the most powerful of whom were already completing the designs for the bunkers they plan to escape to if we continue to be foolish enough to believe their minions' lectures that we were all, collectively, too lacking in basic common sense do anything about oncoming catastrophes.

This time around, can we please just ignore them?

Most of the work we're currently doing is dream-work. It exists only for its own sake, or to make rich people feel good about themselves, or to make poor people feel bad about themselves. And if we simply stopped, it might be possible to make ourselves a much more reasonable set of promises: for instance, to create an "economy" that lets us actually take care of the people who are taking care of us.



## Against Community Building, Towards Friendship

By: ziq

### The Dangerous Failings of Community

As long as I've been around other anarchists, I've witnessed an unremitting reverence for the sanctity of community.

The idea of community is held in such high regard by anarchists that it's eerily reminiscent of USA liberals paying fealty to the "sacred ground" of their nation's capitol. Community is something consecrated and unassailable to anarchists. It's the bond that binds us to our fellow true believers. It gives us belonging, direction, purpose, safety, all those good things.

But does it really?

The more time I spend amongst anarchists, the more I find the "anarchist community" ideal to be inherently unattainable and isolating. It seems every attempt at building an organized egalitarian community ends up enabling gross misconduct by certain members and the end result is always demoralizing burn-out for everyone involved.

The attempt to group disparate strangers who barely get along, based on an imagined affinity (typically ideology, but painted in such broad strokes so as to be rendered inconsequential) inevitably manages to crash and burn every time.

A gentle, alienated soul's deep pining to build community will often get exploited by abusive people so they can insert themselves into their target's life. By attaching themselves to a community, virtually anyone can gain instant access to the minds and hearts of people that would never have associated with them otherwise. Anarchists are so dedicated to maintaining the ideals of egalitarianism, openness, inclusivity, mutuality and fraternity, that they'll put up with a whole lot of shit from people that demonstrate over and over again that they don't share the same values as them. Abusive people are tolerated and even accepted by us so long as they identify as belonging to the anarchist movement, because of course anarchists aren't fond of gatekeeping or erecting barriers to entry.

When a person announces they're a member of the anarchist community, we immediately hand them a black cat badge to pin to their shirt (usually metaphorically, sometimes literally) and welcome them with open arms, no questions asked.

Predictably, parasitic abusers are able to swagger into our spaces flashing that official membership badge, and they get to work preying on vulnerable, empathetic people who are looking for fellow travelers who share their ideals.

Again and again I've witnessed these entitled parasites take advantage of the compassionate anarchist spirit and they'll often spend years tearing people's lives apart until the community becomes so toxic and unbearable that everyone abandons ship to try and preserve their mental health and physical safety. In the end, everyone seems to end up more exploited and traumatized by the anarchist community experience than they would have been without it.

Due to my experiences both managing and participating in various anarchist spaces, I'd really like to throw out the entire idea of anarchist community and re-imagine how anarchistic interactions can be manifested going forward.

Much like the related ideologically sacred institution of democracy, the whole concept of community is insidious and underhanded, an ideal seemingly designed to manipulate people into associating with bullies and dickheads by whittling away at basic human needs like autonomy, self-determination and consent.

Too many times, our dedication to building unfettered communities open to all people lowers our guard and lets cops, rapists and assorted authoritarians infiltrate our movements and inflict lasting damage to both our collective and individual psyches.

A community in its current form almost requires everyone involved be socialized in extreme docility, forced to exist in a perpetual state of submission to everyone around them. Otherwise, the community would almost certainly implode.

Without that docile meekness being forced on all the community members, the billions of people living boxed up and piled on top of neighbors they're barely able to tolerate would inevitably sharpen their fangs and rip each other apart to reclaim the personal space every living being needs in order to exercise their autonomy and individuality.

If our sharp claws weren't meticulously and regularly yanked out of our fingertips by the upholders of community, to forge us into obedient and pliable little shits, the entire concept of community would be rendered unworkable.

Both the metaphorical and literal concrete walls that contain us and our egos would quickly crumble into rubble without the authority of the community to hold them up.

There's a word that describes how we feel when we need time to ourselves but can't get it because we live in these vast interconnected global communities, surrounded wall-to-wall, block-to-block, nation-to-nation in every direction by other people and have no way to tune out their vociferous voices and energies. It's the mirror image to loneliness - 'aloneliness'. This innate state of being was surprisingly only coined recently, in 2019, by Robert Coplan, a Canadian psychologist.

If loneliness is the yearning to connect to others, being alone is the deep-seeded need to disconnect from others and retreat into the self. This is something that becomes harder and harder as the communal collective is centered and the individual is increasingly diminished and cast as a villainous foil to the precious community ideal.

Also in 2019, a study of nearly 20,000 people (Scientific Reports volume 9, Article number: 7730) established that we need to spend regular time immersed in nature to maintain our well-being. Too often, our proven need to embrace these solitary experiences is discounted because so much reverence is placed on the building and expansion of society and community by the authorities who shape our world.

### Re-imagining Our Social Bonds

Someone posed this question to me recently about my frequent critiquing of democracy:

"If you're against democracy, how would you propose consensus be reached among an anarchist community?"

Before I can answer the question, I should point out that most definitions of 'commune' wildly conflict with anarchy. Take this common definition, for example:

"organized for the protection and promotion of local interests, and subordinate to the state; the government or governing body of such a community."

So like a lot of the authority-based concepts certain anarchists feel the need to appropriate, a community is assumed by polite society to come with a certain expectation of authority.

To avoid the inevitable confusion that comes with the strange urge some people have to redefine preexisting concepts, I'd really like to bypass this loaded word completely and instead try to instill a more anarchist bent to the concept of community as anarchists presumably mean it...

So let's just call it 'friendship', since that's essentially all we desire from what we term an 'anarchist community': Trusted friends we can live with, play with, learn with. It's a simple and effective word that only has positive connotations, and isn't going to make anyone think of all the glaringly authoritarian communities held together by a state's threat of violence and built and maintained by exploited workers who most often can't even afford to live in said communities.

I think it's important we use clear and concise language to describe our objectives as anarchists, and too many of the words we lean on when outlining our desires for a domination-free world have hierarchical baggage permanently weighing them down.

Okay, now let's rephrase the question in a way that leaves no room for misinterpretation...

"How would I suggest you make decisions when you have disagreements with your friends over which course of action to take?"

Well, I wouldn't suggest anything.

People really don't need me or anyone to direct their interactions with their friends or dictate to them how they should define and fulfill their relationships.

If you and your friends need me to prescribe you a program to adhere to in order for your friendship to function, you're clearly not interested in practicing anarchy.

Why even put the effort into maintaining the friendship if you need to involve an external body to create systems, laws and processes to ensure the friendship remains equitable and fulfilling? If your friend isn't being fair to you, why are you still their friend?

Anyone who would exploit you, diminish you, neglect you or deny you your autonomy isn't acting as a friend and doesn't deserve to be considered one. A friend cherishes and respects you. A friend encourages you to fulfill your desires and does everything they can to help achieve your needs.

And if you're not friends with the people you're in disagreement with, why do you care to reach

consensus with them? Why share experiences with them and tie your fate to their desires if you don't even like them?

Is your idea of 'community' (friendship) a suffocating debate club where people who don't even get along have to endlessly negotiate with each other and reach some arbitrary consensus in order to continue to co-exist?

Wouldn't it be a lot easier to just not enter into formalized relationships with people whose values so conflict with your own as to provoke such intractable conflict?

If you truly desire anarchy, it's important to make your own decisions unhindered by the decrees of lionized authority figures and their taped-together social systems. Only you and your friends can decide how to best maintain your friendships and how to commune with each other in a way that benefits all parties.

Unless you're disabled in a way that affects your sociability, it's unlikely you need formal rules of association to be directed to you before you can form bonds with other humans you wish to commune with. That's all social systems are really, a set of rules someone decided everyone should have to follow, regardless of whether or not they share the same values. It's fundamentally defeating to anarchy when self determination, freedom of association and autonomy are overwritten by someone else's values. Upstanding citizens of the nation might prize free speech, democracy, morality, free markets, peaceful protest and community, but that doesn't mean you have to.

No authoritative body should presume to possess the power to tell others how to solve disputes they have with their friends. If you can't get along with a friend without ordinances from above then you should probably question why you remain friends with them and if the relationship is worth the emotional toll it exerts on you, your friend and those around you.

This all of course assumes you're adept at socialization, which admittedly a lot of us aren't, due to a diverse array of disabilities and emotional traumas, but that's just more proof that no one can or should prescribe exact instruction to people for creating social relations amongst themselves. Every relationship is different, and the only real prerequisite should be a desire to share experiences and support and nurture each other.

## Discarding Bad Relationships

Like I've mentioned, there are a lot of abusive, exploitative people who enter our spaces, create a world of hurt, sap everyone of their energy, sabotage our projects by creating constant conflict and division without actually contributing anything, and then when someone finally objects to their behavior, they assert their supposed democratic right to continue to force themselves on everyone because "you have to reach an understanding / consensus / agreement with your fellow community member".

Fuck that.

If someone is abusing or exploiting you, just eject them from your orbit. You're not under any obligation to kowtow to the desires of a person who has demonstrated they have little respect for you or your values. Once they've shown you they're not your friend with a pattern of selfish and harmful actions, it's not your responsibility to protect their ego and keep shining their black cat badge.

You have to live your own life and can't pour all your energy into making some random bully feel included in your social circle because they've announced they're some stripe of anarchist. Anarchy isn't a numbers game, it won't matter if there's one less member in your anarchy club, especially when that person has demonstrated they don't actually give two shits about doing anarchy.

We need to know our limitations. We need to stand up for each other when we see abuse and not allow the abuse to be tolerated and normalized under the guise of community, democracy and inclusivity. It's important to set clear boundaries with people and cut ties with them when they cross those boundaries and begin to damage your mental health and sense of safety.

As for what those boundaries should be? There are so many disparate personalities and unique circumstances that can occur in a relationship, so as always it's not realistic to set universal metrics. There's really no fail-proof program for human association, which is why it's so important for each able individual to be aware of their own boundaries and be ready to enforce them. But generally, if you no longer feel safe in a space because of a certain person's presence, feel you're exerting too much energy to satisfy their unreasonable demands and getting little back in return, or frequently feel anxiety due to their words and / or actions... It's likely time to cut ties.

When you're in an organized community with

someone, you're denied direct control over the relationship. Instead, your interactions are dictated by whatever social norms and rules have been developed by those who formed the community, often long before you were born. If you don't want to be around someone any more, you have to wrestle with the system's checks and balances, essentially pleading for permission from the community and its decision-making mechanisms to disassociate from the person.

In any community, a communal divorcing is a time, money and energy consuming social affair involving the proclamations of multiple people both familiar and unfamiliar, public hearings, and an exhaustive bureaucracy.

On the other hand, ending a simple friendship is much simpler because you directly control who you choose to spend your time with, without an entire community body inserting itself into your private life. No one can force you to be their friend and devote your time and energy to them everyday, but communities constantly force you to negotiate with unkind neighbors, relatives, coworkers, landlords, bosses, teachers and others who you'd never spend time with if you had the autonomy to choose.

Freedom of association is an anarchist principle that always manages to get undermined and maligned by the fiercely un-anarchist principles the assorted anarcho-democrats, Chomskyists and Bookchinites

insist on bringing to the table. I'd argue there's no anarchist principle more important than being able to choose who to spend your time with. I'd much rather choose a few friends than amass community members.

## Systems Don't Protect People

People protect people.

We tend to put a lot of faith in the systems that govern us, and assume they'll protect us from harm when more often than not the systems fail us at every turn with tepid half-measures and bureaucratic meandering.

Building our own systems to live by can be a worthwhile pursuit, but if we try to extend those systems to a wider sphere of people, they'll inevitably break down as an increasing number of those people find the system doesn't serve their diverging needs and begin to rebel.

The bigger a community and its bureaucracy grow, the more disconnected from people and their needs the community gets, until the point where a community becomes devastatingly isolating and dehumanizing to everyone forced to exist within its towering walls.

A lot of anarchists have reacted to me speaking ill of community with fear and anger because they've



internalized the idea that "community support" is something necessary for their survival. But if they're being honest with themselves, by community support, they really just mean welfare from the state. This fear of losing access to healthcare, unemployment / disability insurance, and a pension doesn't really have anything to do with their concept of community, and is really just a form of cognitive dissonance.

As an anarchist, I know the state doesn't work for me and never will. If a community is a collective bureaucratic body that assigns duties and resources to people depending on prefigured factors, it's acting as a state, regardless of whatever fancy new tag is affixed to it, and it will no doubt grow increasingly isolating and destructive as the years wear on and the power of its architects and benefactors is cemented.

We already have authorities that decide who gets how much and when, and it's brought us nothing but suffering. We already have community and it treats us like trash every day of our lives.

Pretending this disconnected forced grouping of disparate peoples with wildly diverging values, needs and desires is somehow capable of serving us equitably and with care and respect is mournful.

Community always seems to be the spark that ignites an inferno of hierarchy and domination. So much horrific oppression and death has been justified in the age of Leviathan by attaching it to "the good of the community". I've seen so many people, including anarchists, sweep all manner of abuses under the rug in a desperate attempt to "protect the integrity of the community". Somehow the community is always put before the people who inhabit it, as if a precarious idolon drawn from thin air and held together by nothing but collective resolve is more sacred than life itself.

Arranging people into societies and communities and nations and cities and suburbs and civilizations that have wildly varying resources only serves to separate us and creates permanent warfare among us, with those lucky enough to belong to the more resource-rich communities getting every advantage over those in more barren, parched lands.

Community is an ever-expanding wave that washes over the land, leaving its salt in the soil and forever amassing momentum until it morphs into its final form: an impregnable global civilization with no chink in the armor, no weakness we can assail in the hopes of containing its immense authority... Until



finally the wave collapses under its own weight, adding a thick layer of blood to the salted land.

Friendship can't scale up to swallow the planet. Friendship remains forever small, personal, intimate, deliberate, voluntary, decentralized. This is a feature, not a bug. Friendship allows you to associate and disassociate with others at will, while always maintaining your individuality, the sanctuary of your headspace and the clarity of knowing who you are and what you need. The dictates of anonymous wider society and the supposed common good needn't cloud your mind when you form friendships rather than build communities.

Community is division. It's nationality, it's borders, it's imperialism, it's haves and have nots, it's cruel, brutal, unending warfare against the sacrificial out-groups to benefit the blessed in-groups.

Your friends don't exploit you. If they do, they're not your friends.

Communities exploit everyone, both within and outside their very clearly defined borders, every minute of every day of every year and they have for centuries. Draining the most underprivileged community members of their blood, sweat and tears to chiefly benefit the most privileged in the community: the bosses, the academics, the desk jockeys, the landlords.

The potholes in the neighborhoods of the working poor are always as deep as canyons, while the privileged

classes who work and sweat far less can commute in the comfort of their air-conditioned Teslas bump-free on the smoothest of asphalt.

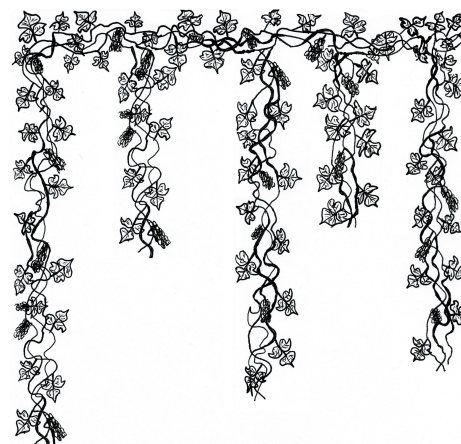
European welfare states and other 'progressive' communities exist on the backs of the poor of the colonized global South. Resources and intensive lifelong labor are stripped from billions of people who receive only basic sustenance in return, so the residents of those hallowed Western communities can lounge in comfort with their wide assortment of state-granted privileges.

I've heard some wannabe world-builders say friendship is a weak bond to base a life on, that friends are as unreliable as the anonymous community members they so revere. But those same people will always extol law, order and democracy no matter how many times those houses of straw blow up in their faces. And honestly, is anything more insufferable than utopian communists critiquing someone else's supposed idealism?

Bureaucrats and their communal systems won't give us anarchy. Maybe a little social democracy as a treat, at least until the system collapses back into fascism when enough wealth accrues at the top.

So what is the purpose of building an anarchist community? If the difference between a community and a group of friends is that the community is bigger, more impersonal, more bureaucratic, more policed, with highly diverging values and a centralized concentration of power... Then what use is community to a group of people who seek to decentralize everything in their path, dismantle systems, negate authority and become as ungovernable as possible? What use is community to anarchy?

I really feel we should be making friends rather than building communities.



## *When Failure Leads Us Home The Trap of the American Dream*

*By: Mia Birdsong*

"A country is only as strong the people who make it up and the country turns into what the people want it to become."

--JAMES BALDWIN

The American dream is both an illusion and an aspiration. It is a false promise and real potential. It is a jumble of contradictions. The Founding Fathers wrote powerfully about freedom and self-governance while inhabiting stolen land, enslaving people, and excluding most of the population from participating in that self-governance. Today, America is a place where a Black man can be elected president by people who would not hesitate to call the cops on a Black person picking up trash outside their own house, barbecuing in a park, or napping in a dorm. It's a country where we celebrate the extravagance of the super rich collecting cars they will never drive and buying mansions for their horses while witnessing whole communities of people living outdoors in tent cities because the cost of housing is unreachably high.

While the American Dream has never been an option for most members of some communities-queer folks, unmarried adults, Black folks, people who grow up poor, just to name a few-it's also overpromised on the satisfaction, contentment, and happiness it delivers to people who do get their piece of it. The people winning at the American Dream are some disconnected, unsatisfied, lonely people.

The American Dream's narrowly defined paths to happiness and success rely on an acceptance of prescribed roles, and a lot of accumulation and exhibition. The quintessential "self made man" (and it is almost always a man) is self-sufficient, confident, stoic, righteously industrious, performatively heterosexual, and powerful. His success is signified through acquisition-home ownership, marriage, and children--and display of taste and things--craft beer and Courvoisier, Teslas and big trucks, bespoke suits and I-don't-care CEO hoodies. On the surface, it looks like that idea has evolved some. We have our Beyonces, Baracks, and Buttigiogs. But that doesn't mean the American Dream has become liberated from its origins or that its promise of freedom is more free. It just means more of us are permitted entry to the club if we do the double duty of conforming to its standards and continuing to meet the ones set for us--women must lean in, queer couples must get married, people of color must be master code-switchers.

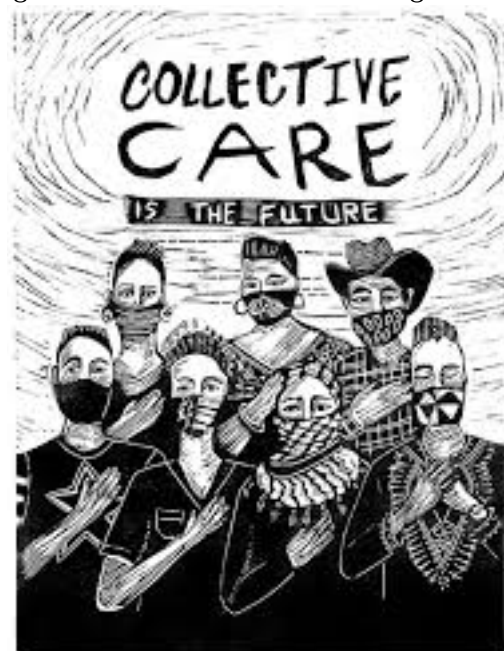
The American Dream remains defined by whiteness and masculinity, no matter who occupies the role; our most rewarded and celebrated leaders, even if they are not straight white men, exemplify these standards. And because it is held up as the ideal we should all want to achieve, we've all been socialized to reach for it. Perhaps most damaging, it includes a toxic individualism that creates barriers to deep connection and intimacy. When we are oriented toward doing it our selves and getting ours, we cut ourselves off from the kinds of relationships that can only be built when we allow ourselves to be open and generous.

My work sits at the intersection of race, gender, and class, and has a particular focus on family. My advocacy and activism through organizations like the Economic Security Project, Family Story, and the Family Independence Initiative, and think tanks like the Aspen Institute and New America point toward reframing our understanding of how we achieve the "good life" and who we live it with. In order to be able to tell a reimagined story of what should matter when it comes to family in the United States, I have studied and scrutinized our most accepted versions of "good" and "bad" families. Family holds a place of honor in the American Dream—a "good family" has some of the status of a successful career, but with the added weight of morality and virtue. By American Dream standards, a "good family" is an insular, nuclear family comprising a legally married man and woman raising biological children. This family is self-sufficient and as such, functions as an independent unit. It's toxic individualism, but in family-unit form. Despite adjustments that have made a little room for same-sex partners who conform to a heteronormative standard, Black people who can live up to a white standard of respectability, and women who do paid labor in addition to the unpaid labor they already shoulder, the model is basically the same. Any deviation from the model is seen as second best or underachieving. Adoption is some thing you do after pregnancy doesn't work out. Being a single parent only happens when you can't keep or find a partner. Divorce is a failure. A rental is where you live until you've gotten your down payment together. Unmarried couples are asked, "When are you getting married?" We may understand why a couple does not have children, but somehow being child-free confers a lack of completion of, and commitment to, family. Married couples without kids, particularly women, are regularly asked, "When are you going to have kids?" And while a woman might not be considered a failure as a human being if she never marries, she's still seen as a bit sad.

It's not just those of us who have families at or near the top of the hierarchy who hold these perspectives. We all internalize cultural norms, including the people whose lives are belittled or disregarded because of those standards. And we often do see our choices through the lens of society's judgment because we are not separate from society. Even if we intellectually understand the double standards and antiquated values underlying those norms, our heart and gut doesn't always evolve at the same pace. Hell, I have been studying and thinking about all of this for more than two decades and I still catch myself upholding some old story about love, happiness, or success.

Without accessible, celebrated models of what happiness, purpose, connection, and love look like outside the American Dream model, we are pulled in toward it. I feel this tugging all the time. I've achieved just enough of the American Dream that sometimes it has me thinking, Maybe, just maybe it is for me. Just maybe its security and sparkle are real. Deviating from the beautifully packaged path can seem reckless and even arrogant. I mean, I have not just myself to consider, but my husband and kids as well. Who the hell am I to question this reward? Sometimes I just want to ignore all the obvious holes in the story, the places where the lies show through the facade, and just let the current take me.

There is a version of my story that makes it easy to hold me up as a poster child of the promise of the American Dream. But the reality has more nuance and is, frankly, a more beautiful truth. I am the only child of an only child on my mother's side. I am a first-generation American on my daddy's side. I am the child of divorce, raised by a single mom. I was poor to working class as a kid. I left home at eighteen and



eventually made my way west like colonizing pilgrims, like hopeful fame-seekers, like Black refugees of the Great Migration. I found my American Dream in Oakland, California.

I don't remember as a young child ever wanting to be married to a man, raising children. As a teenager, I remember clearly that I didn't want children—I did not like them. I don't remember ever wanting the house, the car, the dog, the career. I remember those Enjoli commercials with the career woman leaning in pre-Sheryl Sandberg-acquiring literal and figurative bacon without emasculating her husband (and smelling lovely the whole time, apparently). I don't know if I didn't think those things were for me, or I truly didn't want them. But one morning, the summer I was twenty-seven, I woke up and as I looked at the ceiling beams above me, I felt both an emotional and physical urge to be a mother. It was like a switch had been flipped and I was filled with a longing that had weight. It felt like falling in love and heartbreak at the same time.

My dream of motherhood didn't shift my idea of family toward the nuclear. It didn't really occur to me to do it with a partner. I was raised by a single mother, but maybe more than that, I am very much an only child and the idea of having to make parenting decisions with another person was unappealing to me. In deciding on pregnancy versus adoption, I chose the latter because sperm cost money. I eventually began readying myself to become a foster-adopt parent. I researched my options, questioned social workers, reviewed forms and pamphlets, did some vague budgeting, and began looking for the kind of housing that the system requires foster parents to have.

And then I met Nino. When I tell this part of our story, I usually say he ruined my plans. I knew within days of meeting him that I would marry him and that complicated my adoption plan and messed up my timeline. But, really he helped me realize something much fuller than I had imagined for myself. I am still sometimes surprised to find myself here living this seemingly quintessential American Dream. We've been married since 2005. We have two biological kids—a girl and a boy. We are entrepreneurs. We own our home. We make enough money to pay for gym memberships, tutors, and the occasional vacation.

But, from the beginning of our lives together, I knew that maintaining and continuing to develop my

chosen family and my community was not only how I would get my needs met, but how my marriage and my kids would be supported. Ours is not the insular, self-sufficient nuclear family. We have created some of the sense of safety, belonging, and care we all need—not just with the four of us, but with others. Our family is made up of chosen, adopted, and biological aunts, grandparents, siblings, uncles, and cousins. Further, we have a community of friends and neighbors that provide both safety net and spring board-support when things are hard, and celebration when things are especially good. We, in turn, provide those things for them.

All that said, it is hard and not quite enough. I struggle with the cultural push toward insularity and self-reliance. I suffer from the inertia of screens and the ennui of stuff. I indulge in the brief hit of dopamine comfort that comes from online shopping (the kitchen gadgets, the houseplants, the skincare products). I drink wine to unwind. I sip from the warm cup of promised safety and comfort the American Dream serves up even though I know it's a lie. The closer I get to the mirage of security and achievement and the more trappings of capitalism I acquire, the harder it is to resist.

But I do have examples to reach for when I find myself floundering. Growing up, I had models of how to do family and community in ways that are expansive, that provide safety and security through love and commitment, not money and alarm systems. I had sketches of blueprints that showed me how family can be built, not just from blood and law, but shared experience and values, from love that looks like a million things.

My mother, an only child, was orphaned at a young age. What little family she did have disowned her when she married my father (she is a white woman from Macon, Georgia; he was a Black man from Jamaica). My parents split up when I was three. My dad moved a few states away to go to law school and the rest of his family was in Jamaica or Canada. I saw him and them once or twice a year and regularly talked with my dad on the phone, but in terms of consistent, present support, we were without family. So, my mom patched together community for us. I remember a Thanksgiving at her English professor's home and a week living with friends when my mom had knee surgery. I had a trio of aunts Melanie, Lisa, and Dorothy—made up of her closest friends. We joined the Jewish Community Center because they had a single parents group (we are not Jewish). With them,



we did things like have potlucks, go on camping trips, and celebrate holidays. She made sure we knew our neighbors and the important details of their lives. That meant that when I got home after school and forgot my keys, I had places to stay until she got home from work.

I built family and community for myself starting in my late teens. I built it out of childhood friends and people I worked with. I built it out of people I met at bars and shows and protests. I built it out of friends of friends. Actually, it's inaccurate to say I built it. One person does not build family or a community. While I can claim my deliberate effort, everyone who is part of my circles participated in their creation—actively or passively, they built with me.

For many years, part of the economic justice work I've done has focused on shifting the public narrative around poverty and people who are poor. By using a combination of data and storytelling, I shine a light on the resilience, creativity, knowledge, and capability that exists in low-income communities. In doing this, I counter a narrative that blames people for being poor instead of recognizing both the assets of poor communities and the systemic barriers people are up against. One of the things I focus on is how people who are poor often leverage social capital to mitigate their experience of poverty. Or, to put it more plainly, how connected people help one another out.

Sometimes this is relying on practical support, like when friends pitch in to help with things like home repairs, childcare, and haircuts, instead of paying for it the way middle- or upper-class people are likely to do. Sometimes it is the emotional support people lean on to get through hard times. When I give talks or presentations, I tell anecdotes: A trio of women who created a cleaning business together so they could collectively care for their children while earning money for their families. A mom who got support in raising a child with learning disabilities by starting a parents group for other families with children who have learning disabilities. A man who got his neighbors together to transform the neglected, empty lot across the street from his house into a community green space.

The audiences I speak in front of are full of policy makers, government officials, think tank leaders, and nonprofit executives—people who, by American standards of success, have made it. But inevitably, after my talk or presentation, one of them almost

always a white man—will come to talk to me afterward, waiting until others have asked their questions, and tell me they wish they had in their own lives the kind of community I described.

It's not that these folks don't have friends and family. They do. They have spouses and children. They have people with whom they have dinner or sometimes go on vacation. But something about their lives leaves them feeling lonely.

They are not alone in feeling lonely. There is a wide and growing body of research on how lonely and disconnected people in America are from their friends and from their neighbors. A 2018 survey from Cigna found that a quarter of us don't have people in our lives who we feel understand us. (2) Only half of us have daily meaningful interactions with others. "At least two in five surveyed sometimes or always feel as though they lack companionship (43%), that their relationships are not meaningful (43%), that they are isolated from others (43%), and/or that they are no longer close to anyone (39%)." (3) Only 26 percent of us know most of our neighbors. (4) A third of us have never even interacted with our neighbors. (5)

Not having deep connection is causing us mental and physical harm. Vivek Murthy, former surgeon general of the United States, wrote in the Harvard Business Review that "Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day." (6) A meta-analysis from the Association for Psychological Science warns that loneliness and social isolation significantly decrease length of life. (7)

The American Dream version of success can also damage our ability to relate to others. In an article from the Atlantic called "Power Causes Brain Damage," (8) John Useem cites the work of Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at UC Berkeley, who found that people in positions of power become "less adept at seeing things from other people's point of view." And what is the American Dream if it is not attaining power? Useem goes on to relay findings from McMaster University neuroscientist Sukhvinder Obhi, who found that power "impairs a specific neural process, 'mirroring,' that may be the cornerstone of empathy. The more successful we become, the harder it may be for us to connect with others not only because we've developed the habits of toxic individualism in order to succeed, but because we have rewired our brain.

This thing where white men confessed to me their lack of community happened consistently for a few years, but I didn't give it much thought—until one of these men asked me a question. This man, probably in his early thirties, walked toward me after a talk I'd given. He clearly wanted to say something to me, but kept politely gesturing others ahead of him because whatever he had to say, he did not want to say it in anyone's presence. He began like others had, confessional in his admission that he lacked



the kind of connection and community I talked about. He made it clear that he had friends, but when he compared his relationships to the ones I'd spoken of, it felt lacking. I nodded in understanding.

But then he asked me how to create community and family. I asked him a few questions and gave him a handful of ideas. In the days that followed, I found myself thinking about our conversation, and it made me uncomfortable and unsettled because, as I finally admitted to myself, I should have said, "I don't know." The answer I'd given him was pat and inadequate because the truth was, I couldn't really answer his question.

It was then that I started to see that the more "successful" I became, the harder it was for me to carve out the time that building connection demands, and the less I prioritized deepening relationships. The more uncomfortable I became with being vulnerable and authentic—sharing my flaws, struggles, and fears—the more I felt the need to keep on my armor and present the most together, bad-ass, and brilliant version of myself.

As much as I have witnessed beautiful, strong, interdependent community and expansive, connected family, I have yet to really pull it off the way I truly want. In the last several years, I've felt both agitated and excited about what might be possible. I've felt an energizing desire to be more explicit about the life I'm building. And I want to build that life in deep alignment with my best self's values, and a vision of the world I want to help create.

But what does it really mean to be in deep, close community? What form does it take? Who is included and why? How much of my life do I have to let go of to make room for the kinds of relationships I want? How far and deep must the reach of my heart extend? Can I hold in the light of generosity those who would wish me harm? And what cost is not too much to do so?

Figuring all of this out feels particularly urgent right now, for me personally, for the people I love and care about, and for the future America that I hope for. There is something untenably severed in America right now. I don't mean the "division and divisiveness" so many pundits and thought leaders are lamenting. Those divisions—of class, race, and gender, of values and priorities—have been here for a long time. Now they are just more apparent to more people. What I'm speaking of is our ability to hold space for one another, to empathize, to make time for connection, to care for one another, to be part of one another's lives.

The American Dream's focus on

getting ahead is a race to win so you don't lose. It plays into our well-developed fear instincts, creating a real and imagined scarcity of resources, time, and money. This fear-based sense of scarcity pits us against one another. It also leaves us with a poorly developed sense of "enough," both of the material and of love and care. Both surviving these divisions and perpetuating them is draining us of our emotional resilience, grounding, and breathing room. It has us severing the bonds of empathy that allow us to recognize our shared experiences and our shared fates. This is not to say that there is not a lot of difference and disagreements between and among us. But when we understand those differences as inherently threatening, then we have let that fear allow us to dehumanize other people. (9)

The search for answers to fix our broken experience of community has some people looking backward to the kind of sugar-borrowing and porch-sitting closeness they believe existed in the 1950s. But that was somewhat imaginary and it doesn't work in the context of modern life. We need a vision of community that is relevant and future-facing. A vision that brings us closer to one another, allows us to be vulnerable and imperfect, to grieve and stumble, to be held accountable and loved deeply. We need models of success and leadership that fundamentally value love, care, and generosity of resources and spirit.

### WHAT WE LONG FOR

All of us have ancestral memory of what it's like to live connected, interdependent lives. We may be cut off or too far away from those traditions to claim them, but we can listen to our needs, our longings, and through ritual, rite, and practice build a way of being in the world that honors and makes tangible our connections to one another, to nature, and to spirit.

This is a process of decolonization. Whether you are the descendants of colonizers or the colonized-or, like me, both-all of our peoples have experienced the loss of some thing essential to our liberated well-being. Whether that was taken from you or given away in the bargain to win power, it is loss. Even if you are a more recent immigrant to America, you likely have your own colonization story. And navigating the American landscape means swimming in its slick of genocide, slavery, destruction, and extraction. All of us have something to shed, something to purge, so we can make room for the reclamation and reinvention of community and family.

Creating relationships and connection outside the arrangements that our current culture presents to us can be exciting and liberating. We get to be creative, coming up with new ways to understand our connections to others and new ways of connecting. We get to throw out what we've learned to want and discover what we actually want and need. We get to uncover ways of belonging and loving that we didn't see before.

But it can also be painful for a whole host of obvious and not-so-obvious reasons. We may encounter internal and external barriers. And if you're like me, it's easy to question everything to a disorienting degree that pushes you toward an abyss of nothingness. What pulls me away from that edge is understanding not just what expansive connection can look like, but what needs we all want met. We find our way back to ourselves—making more clear what our truth is—by listening to the deep longing in our own heart.

### WE LONG TO BE KNOWN

We spend a lot of time convincing ourselves and others that we are good people, that we are the best version of ourselves. Part of how we do this is by presenting the world with a curated, if not ideal, rendering of lives. Even without social media, we are selective about the version of us others get to see. We craft stories that highlight our successes and strength, and leave out the places we feel stuck or lost. And sometimes, because we are clever, we present our struggles too, but with their inherent dissonance muted for our audience.

We also engage in the internal strategy of defensively differentiating ourselves from others (by judging, disparaging, comparing) so we can see ourselves as whatever we think they are not (hardworking, moral, enlightened) or beating our selves up for all the ways we think we're failing and fucking up. But no one is all one thing. We are not the worst things about us, nor are we the best things. We are all capable of harm and bad decisions. We are all capable of love and care. We have all been hurt and experienced loss. We all have successes and things we are good at.

This inability to be vulnerable by being our real, uneven selves creates distance inside us, and between us and others. But we long to be known, not just for our wins or talents or the good we do in the world, not just for how we overcome hardship, but for our pain and struggle while we are suffering, for our failures

and shortcomings. We want to be known so we can be accepted and loved just because we are here. We all want to be enough.

### WE LONG TO GIVE AND RECEIVE SUPPORT

So many of us have a deep aversion to asking for help. The idea of asking for help makes us feel like a failure, makes us feel weak. We often think of needing help as a burden. But that is toxic individualism talking! It's telling us that we should be able to do it on our own, that if we were strong enough, good enough, and capable enough, we wouldn't need help.

So, we struggle mightily to do it alone, to prove ourselves to an unrealistic and unhealthy standard, when reaching out could make our lives not only easier, but better. And we know this. We tell our struggling friends to let us know if they need anything, we tell them to call or text if they want to talk. We help them move, practice saying something hard, bring them food when they are sick (and when they are well), and just listen.

Because the thing is, we love to help. Our best self gets a positive feeling from supporting others. It's a feeling that is not about the gratitude we receive or the points we earn, but an alignment with love and care that fills us. When we see someone experience relief or ease or happiness because we helped them, we are filled. It also reminds us that we are not out here alone, we don't achieve or thrive, or survive or get by, on our own.

Amoretta Morris, a wise woman I know who is rethinking philanthropy, wrote, "It's okay to ask for help. In fact, by doing so, you are taking part in the divine circle of giving and receiving. While we often focus on what the request means for the asker/recipient, we should remember that giving can be transformative for the helper. ... By not asking for help when you need it, you are blocking that flow." (10)

"By not asking for help when you need it, you are blocking that flow." This is one of the most liberating things I've ever read. We have a responsibility to each other to ask for help when we need it. Instead of listening to the fictitious lone wolf in us, we must listen to the wolf in the pack, and tap into the impulse that moves us to cocreate opportunities for mutuality, opportunities to care for and be there for one another.

### WE LONG FOR FREEDOM AND

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Both of these ideas are laden and loaded. Our most common understanding of them requires some evolving in this context.

The American Dream tells us that freedom is the state of being unburdened and unconstrained by others or systems. It's about having choices and being able to fully express our selves. It's having the power to be who we want, go where we want, and do what we want. But we tend to understand it as an individualistic concept. This is where we have to expand our understanding to fold in what is actually an older understanding of freedom.

In Liberty and Freedom, David Hackett Fischer explains that the word free is derived from the Indo-European friya, which means "beloved." Friend also shares this common root with freedom. A free person was someone who was "joined to a tribe of free people by ties of kinship and rights of belonging." (11) Freedom was the idea that together we can ensure that we all have the things we need—love, food, shelter, safety. The way I've come to understand it, freedom is both an individual and collective endeavor—a multilayered process, not a static state of being. Being free is, in part, achieved through being connected.

Our thinking about accountability has to expand as well. We often think of it as a system of punishment that's meant to keep us from messing up. And if we mess up, we feel ashamed and feel like apologizing. It's a responsibility to others. Accountability, as I mean it, is more about our selves in the context of the collective. It's seeing the ways we cause hurt or harm as actions that indicate we are not living in alignment with values that recognize our own humanity or the humanity of others. It's about recognizing when our behavior is out of alignment with our best selves. And as Mia Mingus, who you'll read about in Chapter 8, explained to me, you can't hold another person accountable. You can support someone's accountability, but we hold ourselves accountable. Accountability is also about recognizing and accepting that we are necessary and wanted. It's understanding that when we neglect ourselves, don't care for ourselves, or are not working to live as our best selves, we are devaluing the time, energy, and care that our loved ones offer us.

This idea of accountability, like many of the things I cover in this book, exists in a gray area that asks us to examine what we have control over and what we don't; what is our

responsibility, versus what is our fault; who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. The truth is, we need to discard many of those binaries. One of the many things I learned from the people whose stories are in this book is that sometimes those ideas are not static. We will benefit from giving ourselves and others the benefit of the doubt as we navigate our understanding of ourselves and of others. We need to reach for grace as we weave in and out of what is me and what is you, and what is us.

We exist, not as wholly singular, autonomous beings, nor completely merged, but in a fluctuating space in between. This idea was expressed beautifully in Desmond Tutu's explanation of the South African concept of Ubuntu. He said, "It is to say, my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life. We say a person is a person through other persons. It is not I think therefore I am. It says rather: I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share." (12)

## "WE THE PEOPLE"

With these words, the drafters of the US Constitution established the idea of a self-governed union—one built and ruled by its residents. But when they wrote "people," the founders did not actually mean all residents of the United States. They were thinking about people whose class, race, and gender matched their own.

But thanks to the people they left out (and a few good accomplices), progress has moved us closer to realizing the aspirational sentiment of their words, instead of being limited by their intentions. It is that—the ability and desire so many of us have to make America better than intended, to improve upon what those who came before us did, planned, or even imagined—that is what we should recognize as the American Dream. Because a dream is an imagined reality, it is about bringing something into existence that wasn't here before. As Baldwin wrote, "A country is only as strong as the people who make it up and the country turns into what the people want it to become." (13)

We are witnessing a shift right now. A stale version of the American Dream is crumbling, breaking apart, and being discarded as a new version emerges. People are widening the narrow roles they've been assigned. Many of us are refusing to feel guilty or shameful for not following convention when it comes to success or building family and community. Many of us are moving through the grief that comes from letting go of the picture we had of

what our lives would look like so we can make room for a different, and maybe even better, picture. More of us are creating new (to us) and reimagined models.

These ways of creating relationships, family, and community are, of course, not actually new. What is new is that people who are following unconventional paths are more public, are documenting their experiences, and are able to find one another more easily (thank you, internet).

Part of the essence of this shifting is that connection is not about a particular structure, it's about values and love and care. It's about the things that provide what we long for, whatever form that takes. It's about pulling apart the boundaries of what love and friendship look like, what romantic partnership is and provides, and who counts as family. It's about finding your people and redefining who "your people" is.

It's in communities like the ones you'll read about in this book that we can find proof that another world is not just possible, but is emerging all around us. The places that I've found the strongest, most expansive, boundary-bending, inclusive examples of family and community are among the people who experience the most adversity and oppression, the people who have always been at the forefront of progress in America. Poor people, queer people, Black people, unhoused people especially the women and gender-nonconforming people among them—to varying degrees operate outside convention because convention has rejected us. People do not survive racism, xenophobia, gender discrimination, and poverty without developing extraordinary skills, systems, and practices of support. And in doing so, they carve a path for everyone else.

I want to point more deeply toward Blackness and queerness here because it is from Black folks and queer folks, especially queer Black women, that I have learned the most.

The gift of Blackness is an expansive notion of family beyond blood and law, "play cousins," and "fictive kin." It's finding home in multiple houses, defying patriarchy and marriage; it's stay-at-home dads, and coparenting. Many of the things that are becoming more acceptable-desirable, even—and mainstream when it comes to family are practices Black people in America have been doing for hundreds of years. Despite attempts to keep us from one another, despite false accusations of brokenness and dysfunction, we have insisted on making family with whomever we love-or even dislike but feel responsible for.

Then there's the gift of queerness. As poet Brandon Wint wrote in a much-quoted social

media post several years ago, "Not queer like gay; queer like escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness all at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like, and to pursue it." (14) There is a long history of queer folks staying open to the infinite ways that love, romance, family, and friendship can manifest while straight people adhered to a handful of options.

This is not to gloss over the harm done by systems of oppression and exclusion. But it is to recognize the elevation that exists despite the oppression people experience. There are folks who, at great cost, just by insisting on existence and self definition, have created more room for the rest of us to be expansive and self-determined in our identities and relationships. We owe a debt to those who have challenged the norms our culture has defined for us—norms that limit who we can be, how we present ourselves, how we love, who we call family. (15)

I wrote this book because I'm looking for connection, love, and care that is beyond the confines and the defaults and norms of my upbringing, the dominant culture, and my own awareness. This book was made as I was in an active phase of exploring all of these ideas and issues—a process that began before I started writing and will no doubt continue long after you read it. The way I talk about relationships, gender, love, intimacy, and so many other things has evolved since I started thinking about them, and it will continue to evolve. As I wrote, I had the familiar feeling of struggling to reach past the edges of my understanding toward something more aligned with the truth I wanted to grasp and articulate. There is excitement and discomfort in that, which I tried to embrace as gracefully as I could.

In making this book, I talked with hundreds of people and formally interviewed nearly sixty. The stories I share with you are snapshots of their thinking and their lives when I spoke to them. But our lives and the relationships in them evolve and shift. What was true for them when they spoke with me may not be true when you read this. Perhaps that goes without saying, but I think it's worth pointing out because it sits so squarely inside what I explore in this book.

As with all things centered on people and relationship, nothing we create together with our whole selves, our baggage and damage, our dreams and passions, is going to be clear or static or definitive. Not only are there not limited ways of creating family and community, but there are not limited ways of staying family and community. It's all mutable and evolving. From this book, I hope you get

a picture of what's possible, ideas for creating connection that are broader and deeper than what you previously thought, a reflection of what you already have lifted up and celebrated, or an affirmation of what you already practice.

1. James Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," in Baldwin Collected Essays (New York: Library of America, 1998), 230.
2. "Cigna 2018 U.S. Loneliness Index," accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.cigna.com/assets/om/loneliness-survey-2018-fact-sheet-pdf>.
3. "Cigna 2018 U.S. Loneliness Index."
4. Kim Parker et al., "How Urban, Suburban, and Rural Residents Interact with Their Neighbors," Pew Research Center, May 22, 2018, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/05/22/how-urban-suburban-and-rural-residents-interact-with-their-neighbors/>.
5. Joe Cortright, "Less in Common," City Observatory, September 6, 2015, <http://cityobservatory.org/>.
6. Vivek Murthy, "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic," Harvard Business Review, September 28, 2017, <https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>.
7. Perspectives on Psychological Science 10, no. 2 (2015): 227–237.
8. Jerry Useem, "Power Causes Brain Damage," Atlantic, July/August 2017.
9. To be clear, I'm not talking about building deep connection with people whose moral compass is broken or who don't respect your basic humanity.
10. Amoretta Morris, Facebook post, September 12, 2015.
11. David Hackett Fischer, Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.
12. Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness (New York: Crown, 2009), 31.
13. Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," 230.
14. Brandon Wint, Facebook post, February 6, 2014.
15. I want to be clear here that when you benefit from the work others have done, especially when you—by nature of your identity or access to resources—hold more power and privilege than they do, you have a responsibility to show up for them. That's the rule. It's not one I can enforce, but I can tell you about it and make clear that I think you're an asshole if you reject the idea of following it.



## VAX SIDE EFFECTS + HOW TO DEAL W/ THEM HOROSCOPES

**PISCES** - BEING SNIFFLY AND SNEEZY DURING A PANDEMIC IS WHACK AS HELL, BUT AT LEAST YOU CAN BLAME IT ON ALLERGIES(?) OR BETTER YET WEAPONIZE THIS TEMPORARY GIFT AND AIM AT A TOURIST. TIS THE SEASON!

**TAURUS** - WHETHER THAT PFIZER'S MADE YOU AN UNCONTROLLABLE RISER OR THAT J + J HAS GOT YOU SOAKED AND READY TO PLAY - YOU ARE HORNY AS FUCK. RIDE THAT WAVE TO O-TOWN WITH SOME LIQUID DREAMS N' SCREAMS, TAURRY.

**SCORPIO** - A SAGE 13 YEAR OLD, ONCE SAID "LOVE STINGS, BUT LIFE BRINGS". THERE'S A LESSON FOR TURNING THAT BURNING SENSATION INTO A POSI FOR YOUR PARTNERS, BUT WE AREN'T SURE WHAT IT IS AND WE CAN'T FIND THAT KID ANYWHERE. YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN SCORPS.

**ARIES** - THAT MODERNA SHIT HAS YOU HYPE. AND YOU'RE ONLY ONE SHOT IN! REMEMBER, EVERY BANK ROBBER NEEDS A KEYED UP GETAWAY DRIVER, AND YOUR RUBBER'S ALREADY BURNING.

**SAGITTARIUS** - OHHHH DAMN. EXISTENTIAL DREAD. YOU ALWAYS CATCH THE WORST OF IT SAGS. IF ONLY THIS WAS ACTUALLY A VAXX SIDE EFFECT THO...

**CANCER** - PHEW! IS IT HOT IN HERE? WORD IS, THESE HOT FLASHES CAN LAST UP TO 2 WEEKS. MIGHT AS WELL PUT ON THOSE BOOTY SHORTS AND LET THE MIDRIFF OUT BABY. NOW IT'S HOT IN HERE.

**VIRGO** - JOHNSON AND JOHNSON? MORE LIKE ANTSY AND PANTSY! AMIRITE? SERIOUSLY THOUGH, YOUR FIDGETY, CLAMMY AND -SORRY TO SAY- IT'S NO SECRET. NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO BE SHOPLIFTING. BUT DON'T FORGET THERE'S ALWAYS AMPLE OPPORTUNITY FOR ONLINE SCAMS VIRGS.

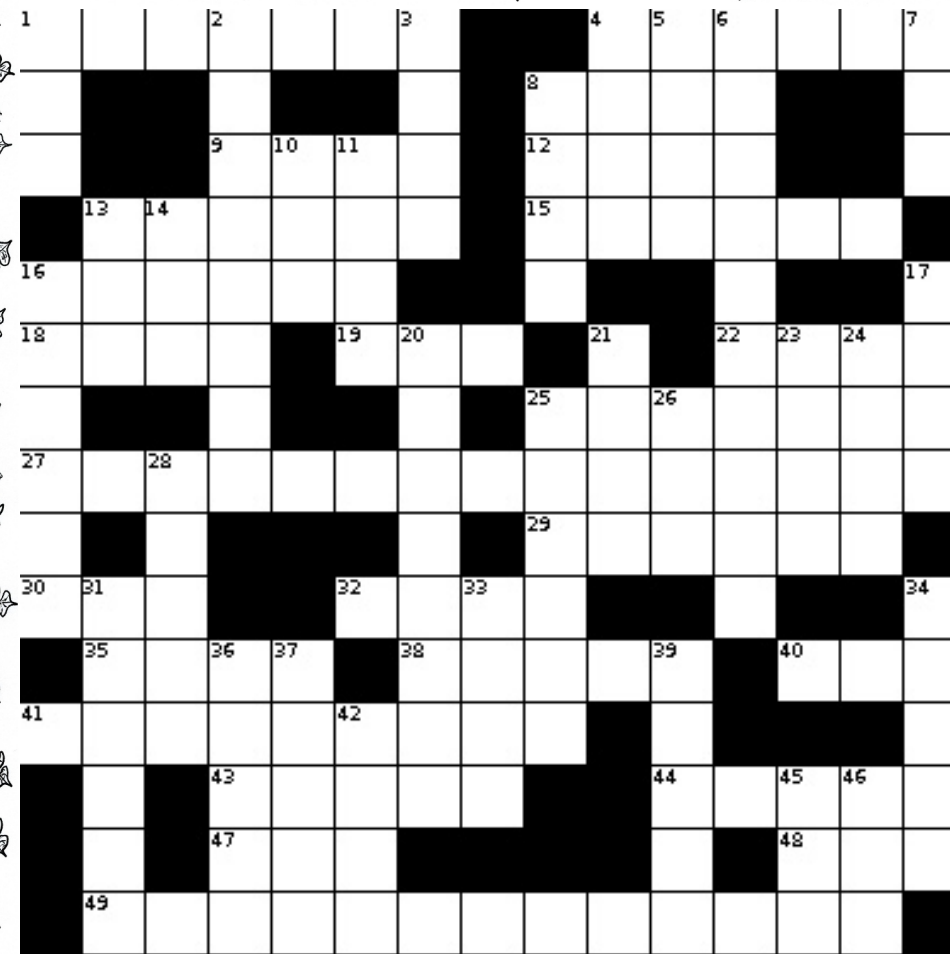
**CAPRICORN** - CAPPY, THESE HEADACHES YOU'RE FEELING ARE MORE INSUFFERABLE THAN THAT LOCAL TANKIE THAD. REST YOUR NUGGET BY SKIPPING THE ZOOM WORKSHOPS FOR A WHILE.

**GEMINI** - OH BOY OH BOY OH BOY. GEM, YOU HAVE BEEN HELLA EDGY AND THE HYPERSENSITIVITY THAT LIQUID MICROCHIP HAS GOT YOU FEELING IS PUSHING IT FOR THOSE YOU CARE MOST ABOUT. WE DON'T KNOW WHETHER IT'S PATH A OR PATH B, OR STOPPING TO SMELL THE BURNING PRECINCT YOU NEED, BUT IT'S PROBABLY THE 3RD ONE.

**LIBRA** - THE MUSCLE PAINS YOUR FEELING ARE DEFINITELY FROM THE SHOTZ, BUT THEY MIGHT AS WELL BE FROM ALL THOSE PROBLEMS YOUR CONSTANTLY RUNNING AWAY FROM. DON'T WORRY, THE PHYSICAL PAIN WILL EASE BY THE END OF THE WEEK. BUT FOR FUCK'S SAKE - FACE A FUCKING PROBLEM HEAD ON, WILL YOU?!

**AQUARIUS** - SLEEPY LITTLE AQUA. EMBRACE THE GROG WITH A MUMBLE OF "FUCK THE WORLD" AND GET YOUR ASS BACK TO BED. EVERYTHING ELSE CAN WAIT. TRUST US.

**LEO** - IT'S NOT SURPRISING YOU'VE GOT SWELLING AT THE SHOT SITE, LEO. BUT IT'S THE SWELLING OF YOUR EGO WE TRULY SAW COMING. ICE IT! AND BY THAT WE LITERALLY MEAN COOL IT, LEO.



### ACROSS

1. Short-barrelled rifle
4. valuable scrap metal, or UK pig
8. chicken or turkey
9. pejorative or complimentary term for "male"
12. "Eureka!" preceder
13. Nestor \_\_\_\_\_
15. Ackles preceder or Derrick ender
16. ancient gay poet of note
18. PBS science program
19. Mr. Pickles, informally
22. zone enflamed in MPLS last summer?
25. of primary importance
27. infamous nickname for architectural confluence of I-240 and I-26
29. mathematician's slider
30. bougie pampering place
32. overeager
35. yesterday, sp.
38. big party
40. pigeon sound
41. intergalactic \_\_\_\_\_
43. hole-pokers in a poorly rolled blunt
44. Struggle, Ital.
47. coffee vessel
48. whiskey drink Rob \_\_\_\_\_
49. WAVL sideshow spot?

### DOWN

1. Queen City, abbr.
2. throwaway action item... & item holder
3. what's smoked while rollin down the street and sippin gin & juice
4. hacker language, broadly
5. Leftish VICE journo, Tess \_\_\_\_\_
6. Wendy Williams' group
7. familiar fabric dye
8. revolutionary Spanish youth grp.
10. X-Factor wrestling duo member
11. years, sp.
13. red book quotee
14. Bearcat or Humvee, eg.
16. recommended item held in 2-down
17. plant
20. encrypted messaging app popularized by Hong Kong protests
21. ALF press issuer
23. Southeast Asian tongue
24. throwies, eg.
25. Gardens, Pinnacle, or Correctional preceder
26. gun lobby group
28. lugar arenosa
31. most wan
33. manual boat propellers
34. Gastonia mill of labor movement history
36. begin
37. pinball & VCRs, for example
39. unnecessary person, yet helpful item
42. to give car or necessary attention (to)
45. TV station formerly focused on courts and crime
46. "White boy Summer" dude's dad

Send Hellbender your-- short stories, report backs, album reviews, poems, ART, playlists, analysis, jokes, memories, fiction, whatever you want!

Any and all submissions can be sent any time to:

HellbenderAVL  
@  
riseup.net

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