



# When We Fall Apart

**A Movement Primer**

**IC INTERRUPTING  
CRIMINALIZATION**

We encourage you to find a restful place,  
a comforting snack, and to take your  
time working through this booklet.

Breaking up is never easy, but  
sometimes it is the best we can do.



# Table of Contents

Preface	6
Why This and Why Now?	8
What is Considered a "Breakup?"	10
Do you Need This Workbook?	11
The Breakup Quiz	12
Why We Stay	16
Exercising Our Liberatory Imagination	18
Breakup Stories, Breaking Up to Break Free	22
Dissolution of an Organization, Coalition, or Alliance	24
Leading Sometimes Means Knowing	26
When to Leave	

Our Emotions	28
Anger	30
Fear	31
Sadness	32
Grief	33
Shame	34
Other Emotions	35
Inspiration for Our Liberatory Imaginations	36
Cultural Work and Spiritual Thought	38
Nature	39
Moving Forward with Integrity	42
Acknowledgements	44



# Preface

In 2021, Interrupting Criminalization and Dragonfly Partners released *In it Together*. Within many movement organizations, people find it incredibly difficult to be “in it together.” Infighting, call-outs, and extreme conflict avoidance leave us feeling stuck, often locked in cycles of punishment and/or enabling. Our inability to step into generative conflict with one another limits our collective capacity to make meaningful change, inside ourselves and our communities, over the long haul.

*In it Together* is grounded in three core assumptions:

- Systems of oppression harm us all
- Multifaceted movement groups make change happen
- This is “the work”

In other words, if we want to do our collective liberation work well out in the world—changing systems, culture, dismantling and co-creating a new world—we have to start by learning how to choose to be together with shared purpose, across all of our differences, as the imperfect, socially shaped humans that we are. That is what we mean by “this is the work.”

*In it Together* offers a framework for navigating conflict in movement groups, provides a diagnostic tool to help assess what the sources of harm or conflict might be, and pulls together a variety of tools and resources groups can access and try out on their own or with support.

*In it Together* defines many words we currently hear when conflict emerges in movement spaces, including:

- Accountability
- Calling-in
- Calling-out
- Conflict
- Group
- Harm
- Intent
- Interests
- Positions
- Punishment
- Transformation

**If you are reading this piece because you are locked in conflict, or because you have not created the space for conflict to be navigated out in the open, start by reviewing *In it Together*. Work through the diagnostic tool with people in your group.**

Think about ways to shift the container for your group that might shift toxic dynamics. Explore and experiment with the tools for conflict transformation. We invite you to do “the work,” if you can; if you have or you’ve tried and relations remain in conflict, read on.

# Why This and Why Now?

It is the summer of 2022. We are three years into a global pandemic. More forests are burning, the heat is getting hotter, and the rain is more torrential. And so are our emotions.

Being together with our loved ones, either masked or unmasked, feels good, especially after so much time when we had to be apart. The months or years of not seeing one another has been tough on so many of us. Choosing to be together, to laugh, to share in happy life events and support each other when misfortune happens (as it does) is a part of being human.

Many of us join or create movement groups because we feel compelled by our circumstances or called by our moral compass. Some of us are in search of a community that will accept us for who we are, understand how we see the world, and support our efforts to make change. Others of us stumble into movement groups and find ourselves changed by the people and ideas they expose us to.

At times, the context of the movement, or your group, or your life changes. Perhaps you need to make a change—to say goodbye, to walk away, to leave, to take time to care for your body or spirit, or to move on to the next phase in your life journey.



In other instances we may find that our groups are falling into sync with the systems of oppression that we seek to dismantle [1]. Instead of finding joy, connection, and growth in the work, we find ourselves feeling stuck, disconnected, or in pain.

What happens when those who we once had respect, admiration, hope, camaraderie—and even love—for cause us to suffer? What happens when these experiences cause us to act in ways that are counter to our own core beliefs? Must we stick it out? Or are we compelled to lash out? What if we cannot be “in it together” anymore? Maybe what we need is to, quite simply, leave. But the simplest act is often the hardest to do.

This workbook was created to help individuals and groups collectively navigate a breakup from another individual or group. It offers up a collection of thoughts, insights, and lessons gathered from people in the social justice movement who have experienced an intragroup breakup and survived to tell the tale, learn lessons from it, and keep moving forward.

We hope that people in the movement ecosystem can turn to this workbook as a salve in times of transition, as they stumble through uncertainty, loss, and the excitement and fear that signals possibility.

[1] Ingrid Benedict, Weyam Ghabdian, and Jovida Ross, “Into the Fire: Lessons from Movement Conflicts,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, January 25, 2022. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/into-the-fire-lessons-from-movement-conflicts/>

# What Is Considered a “Breakup”?

In movement groups, there are many ways we can experience a breakup. In this workbook, a breakup includes but is not limited to:

- An individual or individuals thinking about leaving a group they have been invested in
- An individual or individuals being asked to leave a group they have been invested in
- An individual or individuals who have decided to ask someone else to leave a group that they have been invested in
- A leader or leaders considering transitioning out of leadership
- One group dissolving or sunseting
- One group splitting into new groups
- Coalition members leaving a coalition
- A group asking a member to leave because of behaviors that are out of alignment with the group's stated politics or values
- A person who is struggling with internal and external conflicts eliciting a range of emotions, and who is on the precipice of leaving a group or organization, or leaving the movement altogether

# Do You Need This Workbook?

## If you're checking out this workbook because...

You are struggling with conflict in your group but feel committed to trying to work things out...

You are starting to think about breaking up because you don't know what else to do...

You want to have a proactive conversation about breaking up in your group...

You are pretty sure you want to break up but don't know what to do or how to do it...

You have decided to break up and want to break up with integrity...

You have broken up and you are looking for healthy ways to move forward...

A Breakup has happened and as a result, you are feeling intense anger, shame, or depression, or showing signs of burnout...

## we recommend that...

Stop. Go to [In it Together](#).

First go to In it Together. If you have tried several things in In it Together and still feel like a breakup might be needed, go to the Breakup Quiz, Why We Stay, and Breakup Stories.

Go to Exercising Our Liberatory Imaginations and Breakup Stories.

Start with Breakup Stories in the workbook. Then skim the other sections and see what you are drawn to.

Start with Exercising our Liberatory Imagination in the workbook. Then skim the other sections and see what you are drawn to.

Start with Our Emotions in the workbook. Then skim the other sections and see what you are drawn to.

Stop. Seek support from someone who is trained in supporting people through times of crisis.

# The Breakup Quiz

Are you unsure about whether or not it's time to break up? We know how hard it is to develop and follow a discerning heart. Here is a quiz to assess if breaking up is what you want to do. We recommend sitting down with a hot drink—as a group, on your own, or with another trusted human—to ask yourself the following questions:

Do you feel trapped or stuck?  
What parts of you feel this way?  
Why?

Has the group started to drift  
apart, fizzle out, or lose  
steam?

Have you done things to keep the  
group together that make you feel  
you have compromised your  
integrity?





Do you feel exhausted, stagnant, or burned out? [2]

Are you feeling a strong tension between old ways of being together and new ways of being together that you cannot seem to reconcile?

Has the landscape around the group changed so much that you are no longer doing work that is relevant or effective?

[2] "Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress. Though it's most often caused by problems at work, it can also appear in other areas of life, such as parenting, caretaking, or romantic relationships." *Psychology Today*.  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/burnout>

Are people continuing  
to experience harm even  
after you have tried to do  
“the work”?

Do you need space to honor the  
wounds that being in the group  
has created? Do you believe  
your wounds need to heal  
outside of this group?

Do you have the sense  
that members of the  
group are growing in  
different directions?

Are you feeling the urge to grow,  
innovate, experiment, build  
something new?

If you answered “yes” to any or all  
of these questions, this workbook  
may have something for you.

Now, take a breath — ...1...2...3...4...  
— and a sip of your hot beverage —  
and read on.

# Why We Stay

Systems of oppression and the dominant cultural norms they perpetuate shape how we think about intragroup breakups. We are afraid of letting go or feeling nostalgic for the way things used to be. For so many reasons, we often struggle to see the liberatory potential of letting go.

In many movement groups, we see ourselves as existing in opposition to systems of oppression. It's us vs. them. Many of us are literally in a fight for our lives. The impulse is to stay close to those who are fighting alongside us—it makes sense. To some, digging in deep for the long haul feels like the only way to win.

Even when those we consider colleagues, comrades, friends, or partners actually begin to harm or hurt us or we begin to hurt them, even when our modes of working for justice no longer work, even when we have lost our own sense of purpose within the walls of the community or institution that we have helped to build—we stay. The thought of leaving can feel too much like giving up, losing, or betraying those who have believed in us and fought with us for so long.

Those of us who benefit from systems of oppression and have chosen to work for lasting change can easily see ourselves as saviors. We fall into the trap of thinking that oppressed people—even if we consider ourselves included in that category—are helpless without us. We become enmeshed with the people around us; boundaries become porous or nonexistent. We find it difficult to see ourselves as having value, meaning, or purpose outside of the group. We may martyr ourselves or inappropriately assert our leadership under the false impression that there is a deficit in the group as it exists. By refusing to admit to our own limitations, we prevent ourselves from experiencing genuine personal growth and transformation.



For many of us, our movement groups are one of the first places where we feel we can be fully ourselves, and where we experience positive connection with other people. Some of us use the word “family” to describe how we feel in our groups — we feel connected, cared for, and respected. We call our organizations our “political home.” We feel energized by the shared purpose in the group. Because this experience feels precious and meaningful, we feel reluctant or unsure of how to attend to challenges in the group.

We may avoid conflict with other group members, preferring to keep things happy and peaceful within the group [3]. We may sacrifice honest exchanges with one another in service of harmony. When someone does something that hurts the group, we may choose to ignore it or excuse it instead of confronting them. We are reluctant to do anything that might lead people in the group to feel blame or shame. We deny problems or failures so as not to rock the boat. We may even allow our personal boundaries to be crossed if we think that is what is necessary to keep the group together. We stay even if we feel in our guts that it’s not the best thing for us or for the work [4].



[3] Yotam Marom, “Moving Toward Conflict for the Sake of Good Strategy,” January 13, 2020. <https://medium.com/@YotamMarom/moving-toward-conflict-for-the-sake-of-good-strategy-9ad0aa28b529>

[4] AORTA, “Navigating Conflicts in Movement Organizations” Handout <https://aorta.coop/conflict-handout>

# Exercising Our Liberatory Imagination



With this guide, we ask the question:

What if we could find liberation, for ourselves and others, in choosing to break up and leave [5]? In this moment of struggle – with friends, colleagues, comrades, partners, and loved ones— what if we decide that the best thing to do is to break up?

If you have decided to break up and you want to break up with integrity, you will need to activate your liberatory imagination, either as a group, or—if you are making the decision to leave on your own—with a few trusted confidantes. Ideally, your movement group should anticipate that leaders and other group members will at some point or another decide to leave the group. You could exercise your collective liberatory imagination and come to some shared agreements about how you will handle these transitions. You could even include these as part of your group agreements, bylaws, or employee handbook.

[5] adrienne maree brown, "lessons from a transformative breakup: how to find new ways be in each other's lives and not split the communities we love or the movements we support," July 5, 2013. <https://tinyurl.com/8uxhnxun>

**Whether you are planning ahead or facing an imminent unplanned breakup, we offer the following reflection questions for you to consider:**

If there is a conflict in the group that we can not reconcile alone, what steps will we go through before we determine a permanent break is necessary? Mediation? Spiritual guidance? Full group discussion and vote?

What roles or responsibilities need to be turned over to other people?



How do we talk about the break in a way that communicates mutual respect?

How else can we minimize the negative impacts a breakup may have in our community?

Can this breakup have a positive impact on our community?

Will we be able to redistribute group resources in a way that feels generative?



**If you are an individual thinking about leaving a group you have been invested in, reflect on the following questions:**

Can I do what I want somewhere else instead of staying here and trying to get everyone else to do what I want?

Can I find someplace that is more aligned with my personal values, my preferred strategy or tactic, or my communities' needs?

If I am feeling alienated from the group, can I reframe my experience, separating myself from the role I want to play in the movement? In other words, it's not that I don't fit here, but that the role I want to play does not make sense in this context at this time with these people.

# Breakup Stories

Each of the breakup stories below incorporates the experiences of dozens of different organizations. They may feel eerily similar to your own, but they are not based on any one organization's story. We offer them up as a tool for reflection and as inspiration for exercising liberatory imagination.

## Breaking Up to Break Free

Recently, the organization was experiencing tension among its core staff/volunteers. The tension was caused by interpersonal conflict, primarily between two individuals, but this created difficulties throughout the whole of the group. While neither of the two individuals wanted to leave the org, it was clear that would be best. The conflict that started between two people had created an atmosphere at the organization that was becoming toxic for everyone. Other people in the group started to take sides, developing "camps" of those who supported each of the two individuals. The news of the conflict was shared outside of the organization, though of course the whole story could not be communicated. After much back and forth during which some harm was caused, one of the individuals finally decided that it was time to leave.

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Once one of the individuals involved in the conflict left the organization, there was a period of information-gathering about the events that presumably led to their departure. There were conversations and meetings to regroup everyone at the organization. Some people remained in communication with the person who left, but there was an unspoken agreement to not talk about what happened that made the person leave.

Collectively, the organization made efforts to heal, learn from the conflict, and move on. It turned to a consultant who could help the remaining members move forward. And they did start to move on, although work to navigate conflict in the organization continues. New people were hired, including someone to fill the position of the person who left. New relationships were built. For about a year after their leaving, no one who was in the other “camp” heard from or saw the person who left, but they continued to do the same kind of work that they were doing at the organization. The organization now has a set of Community Agreements intended to help guide them through all kinds of conflict and tension that may (will) arise in the future.

### Reflection questions:

1. What resonates with you in this story? What feels familiar?
2. What emotions arise for you? Where in your body do you feel these emotions?
3. What feels hard in this story?
4. What feels liberatory?

Breaking Up to Break Free

## Dissolution of an Organization, Coalition, or Alliance

Five years ago, when the organization started there was a palpable energy and enthusiasm in the air. Everyone had come together around the initial campaign, and even though they didn't win all of their demands, they had met many of their goals, including building relationships with each other. They built those relationships through a lot of meetings, emails, texts, and phone calls—and a LOT of Zooms. They ate meals together, shared music recommendations, got drinks, and some of the folks went on dates with each other. They shared successes and failures, and started to open up about their lives outside of the organization. They all felt fulfilled in choosing to be in this work together.

And then the event/call-out happened. It shook the group up, as individuals and inevitably as a collective. Folks got angry, sad, discouraged, and disillusioned. People started talking about one another behind their backs, questioning the role that different people played in the event. Some folks were mad at one particular person, while others were on this person's side and supported them. Two sides or "camps" started to form pretty clearly within the organization, with a third group of people who chose not to take sides but who decided to check out from the work and then from the group altogether. At what became the last weekly meeting, everyone who was present decided that they would just stop doing the work. They were having trouble agreeing on anything, but the group did agree on one final thing: to dissolve the organization.



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After the coalition voted to dissolve, many of the people who had been members continued to do their organizing and activist work in different ways. A grouping of former coalition members went on to create a new coalition that was much smaller than the original one. Some folks continued to be connected socially. The impact of the original coalition's past successes remained. People and organizations whose work benefited from that success but who didn't know the story of why the coalition dissolved and disbanded wondered what happened; they sought out new and different ways to replicate the success, but without knowing what lessons the group's dissolution could teach them.

### Reflection questions:

1. What resonates with you in this story? What feels familiar?
2. What emotions arise for you? Where in your body do you feel these emotions?
3. What feels hard in this story?
4. What feels liberatory?

Breaking Up to Break Free

## Leading Sometimes Means Knowing When to Leave

By April of 2020, after navigating the organization through the onset of the pandemic and shifting all staff and programs to be virtual, Maya was feeling tired. Honestly, she was feeling downright exhausted. And then on May 25, George Floyd was killed and the work of the organization where she was the executive director was thrown into its highest gear. As a woman of color, Maya was working to manage her personal feelings about the reality of the moment, but she was also holding herself to a high standard as the leader of an organization with a commitment to seek racial justice in all that it did. She tried to support the staff of the organization to take the time that they needed while also assuring the board that the organization would do work aligned with the needs of its community in the moment. It was a heavy and hard time during Maya's tenure.

Funds began to pour into the organization and more staff were hired than in any other previous moment; the organization gained wider recognition, and Maya was beginning to feel like she had much of her work under control. And then an incident on staff occurred for which she had no control over the outcome. The board and staff were at odds over how the incident was handled and trust was broken among many staff members. Angst and ire were directed at Maya for almost a year and she felt like she didn't even want to come to work anymore. But she did, until finally one day she realized that the organization needed help that was beyond what she could give. So, after conversation and discussion with people internal and external to the organization, she decided that she would resign.

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It's been a year since Maya left the organization. She has taken some time to be with her family and is confident that her resignation was the right decision at the right time for her. In recent weeks, an old colleague from the organization reached out to Maya to reconnect. They got together for coffee and Maya got the updates about what had happened since she left. Other staff had resigned in the last year. But the organization sounded like —while it wasn't perfect and never wanted to be—it was doing fairly well. Her choice to leave was one that had felt unimaginable and devastating at the time, but now seems like it was the best decision for her and the organization.

### Reflection questions:

1. What resonates with you in this story? What feels familiar?
2. What emotions arise for you? Where in your body do you feel these emotions?
3. What feels hard in this story?
4. What feels liberatory?

# Our Emotions



As humans, we feel. Emotions surface all of the time. We experience sadness, are curious, get mad, and even find joy. When we are going through a breakup, either with one person or many, we are full of a mixture and range of emotions. The origin of these emotions might be traced back to a past traumatic experience that could have nothing directly to do with the breakup or how it is unfolding.

As movements for social justice, we understand that people who cause harm have often been harmed themselves—and that survivors of violence are not “all good.” This nuanced understanding can sometimes leave us feeling confused. If we know that a person who has caused harm is someone with trauma in their past, is it still OK to be angry about the harm? Am I still practicing solidarity when I need to put up boundaries to keep myself safe? If I leave now, have I failed?

We are whole people with many different emotions. Our emotions are not “bad” or “good.” They are part of how we process our experiences. We do not have to judge our emotions, but we can learn how to manage them in ways that keep us and those around us safe.

Anger, grief, sadness, fear, and shame often rise to the surface and take hold during breakups. In addition to each of these big emotions, there is much more nuance to what happens when we decide to break up or are broken up with. It can be hard to make sense of the many emotions that we hold during these transitions.

To be able to heal and move through your emotions, it could be helpful to assess what your full range of emotions are—one day could be grief or sadness, while in a week you could be feeling something else. The wheel of emotions and the concept that there is no one way to feel are helpful tools as part of the longer process toward feeling whole again [6].

### Reflection Questions:

1. What emotions were most present when you first started to think about breaking up?
2. What emotions were most present when you made the decision to break up?
3. If you have already broken up, what emotions are coming up for you now?

[6] Molly Shea, "Struggling to Name How You Feel? Try Using This Wheel," Shine, August 26, 2019. <https://advice.theshineapp.com/articles/struggling-to-name-how-you-feel-try-using-this-wheel/>

# Anger

Leaving something that we once had love for is hard. Anger during breakups is completely natural. It can feel good to let our anger flow, particularly when we have been hurt. But how long do we stay angry? What happens when our anger turns to rage? When we let ourselves be angry for too long, we run the risk of not only harming others, but also hurting ourselves.

Psychologists believe that anger is a secondary emotion. Underneath our anger, we may be feeling disappointment, confusion, or sorrow.

## Reflection Questions:

1. What purpose does it serve to stay in our anger? Who or what does it serve? Who or what does it hurt?
2. What emotions might be underneath your anger? How would it feel to sit with those emotions? What support would you need if you let yourself sit with those emotions?

# Fear

In a world where some people have a lot of power and others have much less, fear becomes a common emotion. For those of us who do not have a great deal of power, we can be affected by fear. We strive for perfection in an attempt to keep ourselves safe. We are reluctant to take risks for fear of being judged or punished by others. This fear holds us back from doing or saying things that will ultimately support us and our growth. In the individualist culture of our capitalist system, many of us have learned or been taught that a breakup is bad or that we've "failed." We fear ending something because it will reflect poorly on us or make other people upset with us.

## Reflection Questions:

1. When you think about breaking up, what fears arise?  
What are the risks?
2. Whose judgment are you most concerned about? Why?
3. What is your fear holding you back from?
4. When in the past have you taken a risk or faced your fear? How did it go?

# Sadness

Clearly, when someone breaks up with us or we do the same to someone else, we feel sad. There is no joy in the initial act of either leaving or being left, whether physically or emotionally. We may have regrets about things we did or didn't do. We may feel disappointed that our vision for being in it together did not come to pass. We may find ourselves alone when we are used to being surrounded by other people.

Sadness is a teacher. We can learn something from the experiences that leave us feeling sad. We can use our sadness to tune in to our hopes and needs, and use this knowledge as we seek new experiences.

## Reflection Questions:

1. What will you miss the most about the group you have been a part of?
2. What hopes did you have for the group or for yourself? Which of these were fulfilled? Which were not?
3. What does your sadness have to teach you about what you need?



# Grief

To say that leaving is easy would simply be untrue. Whether you are the one leaving or the one being left, it is never easy or simple. When a group that we are a part of has become a core part of our identity or a key source of support or connection in our life, feelings of grief, similar to the loss of a loved one, often arise. How many of you have ever helped a friend through a breakup? Yeah, it's not pretty. Similarly, leaving an organization or asking someone to step away can be heartbreaking. It can feel like a punch in the face or guts, and leave you ruminating or overthinking.

Grief is a normal part of separation. If we can have compassion for ourselves in our time of grief, we can find ways to live with the grief and make space for new things to grow.

## Reflection Questions:

1. What about the group was important to your identity?
2. How did the group nourish you and help you to grow?
3. Where in your body do you feel grief? What does your grief feel like?
4. What comforts you in times of grief? What do you need from people around you?

# Shame

Of all the emotions that arise in a breakup, shame is perhaps the most difficult to deal with. We live in a culture that relies on punishment to control our behaviors. This happens in families, neighborhoods, schools, and in the systems that we rely on to keep us safe. Too often, rather than focusing attention on the behaviors we are trying to interrupt, punishment sends the message that we are “bad” people, unworthy of love, care, or sympathy, and incapable of growth or change.

Many of us have internalized these messages and experience them as a powerful emotion—shame. Shame can lead us to engage in coping behaviors that can mask or numb our feelings. This powerful emotion may require a powerful intervention. If you find yourself feeling a great deal of shame related to your breakup, we recommend you seek support from a trained professional or spiritual guide.

## **Reflection Questions:**

1. Who or what has supported you to release yourself from shame in the past?
2. What resources exist in your community to support positive coping, spiritual healing, and mental health?

# Other Emotions

In addition to the emotions listed above, we can feel relief, pride, excitement, and even joy in the wake of a breakup. Like experiencing the emotions listed above, experiencing these emotions is neither “good” or “bad.” Sometimes we feel guilty when we have done something that other people don’t like, even when it makes us feel happy, healthy, or whole. We can diminish the power of those guilty feelings if we can understand that someone else’s sadness can coexist with our joy, or that we ourselves can feel both joy and sorrow at the same time.

## **Reflection Questions:**

1. Have you felt relief, pride, excitement, or joy in the process of breaking up? If so, why?
2. What other emotions have you experienced in the context of a breakup?

# Inspiration for Our Liberatory Imaginations

Inspiration for our liberatory imagination around breakups can come from many different sources. Some of these sources of inspiration may resonate with you, stir something inside you, and some may not.

## Movements for Social Justice

In the fall of 1986, Bill Moyers published a model framework called the Movement Action Plan (MAP) [7]. He originally developed the framework in hopes that it would convince a group of depressed activists that they had actually been very successful. MAP includes eight stages that many movements seem to move through. Stage Five is labeled “Identity Crisis of Powerlessness”—when the movement is outrageously successful, but in spite of successes, participants begin to despair in the face of power holders’ intractability. This leads to burnout of individuals and organizations operating in crisis mode, and the realization that they need to build structure for the long haul.

The rise of intragroup conflict we are seeing today may in part be related to this identity crisis and is also a signal that we need to shift our work. Our multifaceted movement for justice and liberation is evolving rapidly. Some of us may need to leave our movement groups to make room for different organizational structures or to take on new activities that can continue building public support. We may need to experiment in ways that expand upon previous ways of doing things or to propose alternatives.

[7] [https://www.indybay.org/olduploads/movement\\_action\\_plan.pdf](https://www.indybay.org/olduploads/movement_action_plan.pdf)

The paradigm shift we seek in the larger context is beginning to happen inside more of the groups in our movement ecosystem. More and more organizations express, internally and externally, a commitment to justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and self-determination within their groups. Some more developed organizations center power-building and seek liberation. Yet very few of us have the skills or practice that we need to navigate truly diverse spaces in ways that reflect our values.

More of our groups include at least one member who has some experience with dialogue, mediation, and other collaborative processes to navigate conflict. We are learning to embrace emergence—the practice of seeing what unfolds in a complex dynamic and responding in real time to those dynamics, rather than sticking to one predetermined plan of action. We are also, each of us as individuals, learning to see ourselves as the protagonists in our stories, the decision-makers in our lives, rather than as victims who have things happening to or around them.

Movement workers at the intersection of gender-based violence and incarceration have been at the forefront of this experimentation. Survivors of sexual, physical or emotional violence at the hands of someone in their family have built a movement that asserts the right to bodily autonomy, physical and emotional safety, and economic security within relationships. They have created shelter systems, hotlines, and support networks for people who choose to leave an abusive situation for their own health and well-being.

Community accountability and transformative justice processes are being activated across the country to support both those who perpetrate violence and those who have been harmed by violence. Relationships are complex and shaped by systems of oppression. The goal is not usually to keep people together. Community members who are a part of these processes are called on to help survivors maintain their boundaries, and to support those who have caused harm to remain accountable for their actions.

[8] Kenneth Cloke. "Conflict and Movements for Social Change: The Politics of Mediation and the Mediation of Politics," July 7, 2013. <https://www.mediate.com/conflict-and-movements-for-social-change-the-politics-of-mediation-and-the-mediation-of-politics/>

[9] adrienne maree brown. *Emergent Strategy; Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017).

Our movements are grounded in the belief that another world is possible. And yet, we have often felt constrained by a sense of scarcity, alienation, individualism, and competition. It is our oppressors, like abusive partners, that keep us in this mindset. Let us invoke, instead, the notion that we live in an abundant world—a world that has enough resources to feed us as we grow and change.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. What, if anything, resonates with you in this section?
2. What other thought leaders, philosophies, or practices in movement spaces inspire you to embrace the liberatory possibilities of breaking up?

## **Culture Work and Spiritual Thought**

Our connection to ourselves as spiritual beings and the cultural artifacts that have emerged to help us understand our connection to spirit also remind us that love, loss, grief, healing, and growth are shared human experiences. As a movement that is itself embedded in systems of oppression, we often feel disconnected from these cultural and spiritual traditions that have been forcibly discredited by oppressive structures.

Through our cultural and religious practices, we mark significant transitions such as pregnancy, birth, marriage, spiritual coming of age, graduation, and death. These practices remind us that though these transitions happen to us as individuals, as a community we are all moving through these stages in relationship to one another, interdependent. Several East Asian philosophies espouse dialectical beliefs that take change and contradictions as a given—part of the human condition.

As human beings we have created complex cultural technologies such as mythology, astrology, and divination tools like I Ching and tarot to help us make sense of our ever-changing experiences. All of these mechanisms for making meaning include stories of groups breaking up, people making the choice to leave, or being forced to leave. These breakups often lead to new adventures, trials, and tribulations that are necessary for survival and growth.

Our music, art, and poetry is replete with messages of love, struggle, heartbreak, and liberation—holding space for our grief and joy in ways that our movements often do not.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. What, if anything, resonates with you in this section?
2. What works of arts and culture inspire you to embrace the liberatory possibilities of breaking up?

## **Nature**

Mother nature is shouting at us, chastising us for waiting too long to divest from the toxic practices, denial, and avoidance of conflict that has fueled the climate catastrophe we are currently living in. Since long before the climate crisis, nature has been modeling healthy interdependence within our ecosystem. The wildfires that are now raging uncontrollably have previously been associated with a natural process—clearing old-growth trees that have become too dense. This clearing creates access to sunlight and rain for the new growth to emerge and thrive. Old organizations that take up too much space may also need to be cleared for our movements to evolve.

Interdependence also requires decomposers, the network of mycelia that break down existing organisms so that resources can be redistributed into the ecosystem for new things to grow. Our reluctance to dissolve our organizations when they are no longer functioning well is an affront to this principle of nature.



No matter what part of the planet we are from, we are all familiar with the seasons and cycles of nature particular to our regions.

Movements and the people who drive these movements also have seasons and cycles. In parts of the Northern Hemisphere we experience four seasons. The Ayni Institute believes that movement leaders also need to honor these seasons [10]. Spring is a time in a person's leadership that represents planting seeds with potential to blossom, new projects, new beginnings. Summer is a time of focused, intense, externally facing action. In the leadership Fall season, a leader's energy begins to wane. They focus on reaping the rewards of the Summer's activity in preparation for the oncoming Winter of rest. To prepare for the Winter, the leader may need to pass on roles and responsibilities to emerging leaders who themselves are in a different season of their leadership.

Given that we don't have an infinite amount of energy, inspiration, or knowledge, the Winter's rest is both inevitable and critical. During the Winter we must rest, reflect, and integrate new learning from the previous seasons. This integration phase can result in new insights to fuel a return to Spring.

[10] <https://medium.com/@ayni.institute/movements-and-leaders-have-seasons-its-important-to-know-which-one-you-are-in-c5dbaa2c37ad>



## Inspiration for Our Liberatory Imaginations

In the summer and fall of 2020, our movements were, by necessity, out on the streets en masse. This period of intense activity was made more taxing because of the additional stressors of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Many leaders found themselves in a perpetual state of Summer. Instead of down-shifting into a much needed Fall cycle, leaders continued to lead at a high level of intensity well beyond their physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual capacity. Many plummeted into a burnout state—a Winter with no energy stores to do anything more than rest. As a result, many organizations were unable to tend to the internal work needed to keep the organization and its people healthy. In some cases, leaders themselves have left the movement altogether because of their own burnout, or because they have been pushed out by staff.

If we can embrace the notion of seasons and cycles in our movements, we will be better prepared to identify the shifts we need to make in our organizations and as people in movement.

### Reflection Questions:

- What, if anything, resonates with you in this section?
- What other aspects of nature inspire you to embrace the liberatory possibilities of breaking up?



# Moving Forward with Integrity

What we do after the breakup is as important as making the decision to leave. If our livelihoods depended on the organization that we left or that has dissolved, we may need to go directly to a new job in order to meet basic needs. In other cases, we can make the choice to break with intention. Either way, we may find ourselves in need of intentional rest.

## Rest

Our bodies, minds, and spirits require rest to allow for resources to be directed towards internal repair, as well as the processing of emotions, information, and toxins. If we don't rest, we may find thoughts and feelings become stuck in a loop of rumination or disassociation. We disconnect from all that has happened, but we do not process what we need to actually grow, learn, and change.

When we are at rest, we can engage in comforting and repetitive, meditative activities such as meditation, prayer, exercise, art, music, cooking, cleaning, or puzzles. In this way, we release excess nervous energy from our bodies.

## Ritual

If we are a group that is dissolving, we can intentionally engage in rituals and practices that acknowledge transition. We can come together in a circle, break bread together, tell stories, light candles, make collages, sing together, dance, create an altar, build a memorial for what we made or did together. These kinds of activities put the body into a state of being that releases endorphins and allows us to relax.

## Reflect

When we are relaxed, we are better able to manage uncomfortable emotions that may arise when we reflect on our time in our movement group. We can consider our behaviors and the behaviors of other members of the group with a little distance. We can accept the situation we were in as it was. We can begin to make meaning out of our previous experience, opening the door to new insights. We can allow gratitude to emerge amid the sadness we may be feeling.

If we were in a group that, as a whole or in part, decided to dissolve, we can gather with other folks and create a collective story for the group. We can describe the context within which the group formed, celebrate the group's successes, honestly name the challenges we faced, and bravely share the path that led to the group's dissolution. If this story is shared, it can serve as a beacon to other groups working through their own struggles.

## Integrate

As human beings, we have the capacity to integrate difficult emotional experiences into our sense of self. As a movement, we can do the same. Unlike the systems of oppression that we work to dismantle, we can hold space for our imperfections, our stories of hardship, our collective grief. We do this knowing that it can make us stronger and more effective in the long run. We look forward to continuing to develop a discerning heart for the sake of ourselves, our movements, and our future.

### Reflection Questions:

1. What forms of rest have you found to be restorative?
2. How have you seen ritual integrated into movement spaces?
3. What ways can you imagine gathering with people involved in the breakup to reflect on and learn from what happened?
4. What would it look like and feel like to have integrated this breakup experience into your sense of self or your organization's story of growth and change?

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Illustrated and designed by [Emma Mei Li](#).

