



Deep Connectedness:  
The Relationship Between Healing,  
Equity, Spirituality & Systems Change<sup>1</sup>

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*Equity (at depth) is a state of connectedness<sup>TM</sup>.*

*Dedicated to Susan Sandler:*

*My friend and mentor, who helped catalyze some of my thinking about systems change at scale.*

*Love & blessings.  
You are missed....*

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This piece is written like  
a memoir, and at times  
like poetry...

**Deep Equity is a State of Connectedness (and a state of love).<sup>2</sup>  
It is a state of radical connectivity...**

Inequity is a state of fragmentation, disjointedness, lack of flow, rupture & stagnation. The parts of the system are not communicating effectively in mutually healthy dialogue, with profound honor for the wisdom of each part of the system and their connectedness to the whole... In that state, it is easy to cause harm to oneself, to others, or to the planet when one cannot feel the impact of our actions, (thoughts & energy)....

Some hallmarks of inequity are:

- Dehumanization
- Devaluing / Value Hierarchy
- Disconnection (from ourselves, from each other, from the land & the environment), & Numbness

So, we have to address *each* of these areas... Making these things & the state of connectedness *real* and embodied in a cellular, not just intellectual way.... From there, (from a Buddhist perspective and from a Deep Equity perspective<sup>3</sup>), greater dimensions of our Innate wisdom are unleashed and freed, for the benefit of all....

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1 This document is part of a larger book in process. So, note that many concepts here are partial representations of that fuller work. Some of this piece also builds on the “*Blockages & Stuckness: Preventing, Noticing, Clearing & Curing*” section (p.49) and “*System Health & Communication*” section (p.40) in the “*Change Management & Deep Equity Primer*,” (S. Petty, 2023), including its introduction to “preventative” and “curative” measures in healing systems.

2 Note: I use punctuation and Capitalization creatively, intentionally...

3 For more on the relationship between Deep Equity and Tantric Buddhism (also known as Vajrayana Buddhism), see: Petty, Sheryl (2023). “Skill, Stamina, (Noticing Avoidance) & Embodied Connectedness: Realizing Our Vows to Be of Service.” In J. Loizzo, F. Brandon, M. Neale, & E. Wolf (Eds.), *Advances in Contemplative Psychotherapy: Accelerating Healing and Transformation* (2nd ed.). Routledge.



My father was a Master Plumber. I think about this these days as I am focusing so much on systems change. (He was also a Mechanic and a Carpenter. He was highly skilled.) He was a *Master of How Things Are Put Together and How To Maintain and Increase Appropriate, Healthy Flow*. I am like him in these regards, as I try to do the same in the systems I work with, and with myself. (This re-connection with his mastery is a source of joy for me... 😊)

This piece is about the *Relationship Between Healthy Flow in a System & Deep Equity*:

- How to promote such flow (think: *chi / prana / loong / aché*<sup>4</sup>).
- How to unclog blockages (in ourselves and in the systems of which we are a part – personal, professional, community, religious or other).
- How to notice when we are complicit in maintaining blockages (in ourselves and in the systems of which we are a part).
- How to increase our awareness, courage and capacity to notice and Effectively address those blockages in ourselves and in the systems of which we are a part.
- And Remove (subtle and gross) Obstacles to Courage, Capacity and Stamina to promote sustainability and scale, in *Deep Equity & Deep Health / Connectedness*...<sup>5</sup>

*Inequity is a state of fragmentation, disjointedness, lack of flow, rupture & stagnation.*

These things keep coming up throughout my work, in so many of my conversations with clients and others these days... Some aspect of this material is alive for them... These notions of:

- flow and unsticking...
- with nutrients needed to reach the system...
- how to unlock repressed and/or contorted wisdom, and
- how to recognize disproportionate burden, and hence disproportionate

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4 One way of describing the motile and life force principle/element in Chinese, Ayurvedic, Tibetan and Yoruba healing systems, respectively. (One might use the more precise and broader term “*vayu*” instead of “*prana*.” Additionally, “*aché*” [sometimes spelled “*ashé*”] has multiple meanings and is not only used as a noun [in multiple ways], but also as a declarative seal, among other functions...)

5 You may be interested in the work of [Courage of Care](#) in this vein, and their notion of “relational culture.”

→ responsibility in solving these situations for the good of all →  
→ ....*without* reducing human variety to a melting pot – i.e., without erasing our particularity & specificity in favor of the universal; without losing either...

Too much or too little flow (i.e., flooding or drought) are both not good. There's something that's *just right*: nourishing and enriching *enough*, without grasping...

These are many of the capacities that will need to be embodied in a critical mass<sup>6</sup> of key system, field and global influencers — in order to get to deeper and deeper levels of equity.... I wonder what it takes to change states of radical numbness *en masse*? What about *willful* numbness?...

One thing to note about this work is that (in my experience) the **Tasks Are Different for Dominant<sup>7</sup> and Non-Dominant** culture people — the blockages take *both* Similar *as well as* Different Forms. This is important to note: Yes, we are all human (the universal), *but* we are *also* culturally and identity-Specific (the particular). If we lose sight of *both* of these, we may Misdiagnose *and* possibly Mistreat the blockages to healthy, unobstructed flow & goodness.

I want to say something else about flow, from a Vajrayana (and particularly Dzogchen) Buddhist perspective, (one of the lineages in which I'm ordained). The experience from this perspective is that **Reality is Already Kind & Free**. It is our misperceptions of this that cause “kinks in the hose,” you could say, and all manner of mayhem and horror that may result from this. Reality is also *Precise*, meaning Clear. It is uncontorted. So, the function of practice — (spiritual or in our case, professional equity & systems change) — is to *Uncontort the Hose* (think “Windex” or “Drano/natural pipe cleaner”) – in ourselves and in the systems of which we are a part, so that the innate Goodness of Reality Can Flow, Unobstructedly. This is what I am seeking in my work with clients, partners, with myself, and with those I mentor and teach...

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6 See the Glossary in the *Change Management & Deep Equity* publication.

7 Not to be confused with *white culture* or *male culture* in general. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with male or white or heterosexual, or any other dominant identity. The issues include a *value-hierarchy* and stigmatization of those who do not appropriately conform to dominant ways of being, doing, thinking, seeing, understanding, analyzing, communicating, etc. “*Dominant culture*” or “*dominant identities*” refer to groups who hold widespread positional power in an organization or society. In the U.S. some of the prevalent dominant identities include white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-gender, native English-speaking, among others. (Note that some of this definition was developed in partnership with Natalie Bamdad.)

So, our task becomes **addressing various states of Disconnectedness & Numbness** — when they appear (or we become aware of them), in ourselves and the systems of which we are a part. This means we also have to **deepen our awareness** so that we even Notice when blockage occurs. The thing is: *sometimes we have become so accustomed to constricted states, that we may not be able to conceive of* (what my first Buddhist teacher called) “greater & greater degrees of freedom.” Such states may seem mythological; fantasies; or for “somebody, somewhere else, at some other time, or in another reality; but most certainly not here, with *these* people, in *this* place, with what I’ve seen, done, or known...”

This “mythology” or unrealizability is not my perspective, nor the perspective of Vajrayana Buddhism. That is, Freedom is Already. Our task is to *Realize* it, in every fiber of who and what we are, in every moment... *Then*, what we perceive and what we do *changes*, for the benefit of all... (In the meantime, we cultivate *Bodhicitta*, Our Innate Kindness / Goodness, and develop the capacity and stamina for Kindness with Rigor™ 😊<sup>8</sup>.)

So, how does blockage and constriction appear **for dominant and non-dominant** people and communities? Of course, this is not an exhaustive list →

1. **For dominant people and communities**, blockage often appears as: fragility, defensiveness, fear of loss, threat, narrow perceptions of how people and things should be, etc... — Any of us can exhibit these regardless of our identities, but the patterns at the systems level in dominant culture orgs and the field of social change – is that these impediments are Rampant (and may / seem to be increasing in this era of greater desire for and equity awareness). These blockages are causing predictable and *Preventable* obstacles to forward progress as a field seeking greater social and environmental well-being.

For me, these are issues of **Stamina**<sup>9</sup>. Hence, individuals, groups & systems exhibiting these traits *Have To Put in The Work, Time, Effort, Discipline, Attentiveness & Commitment* to change them — along with loving and Rigorous accountability mechanisms with those who can help hold us to our commitments for the greater good. This is also an issue of taming the ego and its acrobatic defense arts when we perceive that our worldviews and ways of being are (consciously and

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8 See the Glossary in the *Change Management & Deep Equity* publication.

9 *ibid.*

unconsciously) threatened & being destabilized, so that we can *expand* & augment them, and allow ourselves to be *transformed* by this...

For dominant culture folks (and for key system influencers): “to whom much is given, much is required.” There must be a willingness to give up power (if needed), and to *risk* as core to Deep Equity and authentic allyship...

2. **For non-dominant people, groups & systems**, we have been systematically oppressed for centuries, in now predictable ways & forms (by skin color, language, accent, dialect, gender, religion, ways of thinking, being, doing, analyzing, communicating, loving, etc.) We are often tired and beat down.

Unreckoned with generational violence *coupled with* daily assault has devastating cumulative impact — on everyone. So, our healing tasks are (often) about:

- Self-worth & value;
- Daily survival (healthy food/eating; sleeping; healthy drinking water; walking down the street safely; ensuring our children are well & educated; adequate, holistic healthcare; stable, living wage, non-exploitative work; etc...);
- Alleviating PTSD (conscious and unconscious);
- Relatedly, (further) Unleashing our creativity and gifts for the benefit of all. Thankfully the proliferation of our gifts and brilliance has become more recognized and visible. This is because of the greater accessibility of multi-media avenues, and as a result of the devastating and more visible martyrdom of many Black, Brown and LGBTQ people...

*So, the function of practice is to Uncontort the Hose (think “Windex” or “Drano”/natural pipe cleaner) – in ourselves and in the systems of which we are a part, so that our Innate Goodness Can Flow, Unobstructedly.*



It's something like this (again, not exhaustive<sup>10</sup>) →

	Preventative & Curative	Obstructed/Blocked
Dominant Cultures	Resourced & Generous Curious & Humble...	Scarcity & Fear... Constrained Resources & Hoarding
Non-dominant Cultures	Connected & Nourished	PTSD Survival & Coping
<i>For both: Resting in our Innate Dignity</i>		

...I've also seen **conflict avoidance** in both dominant and non-dominant groups and communities, which sometimes takes the same, and sometimes takes different forms in each. This also includes *gaslighting* oneself & others, and *weaponizing* language, in both communities... (which can be extremely painful...)

We (have and can) promote greater healthy flow via **reclaiming Healing traditions** — somatics, lineage traditions, and other modalities of *reconnecting* to the parts of ourselves, each other, and the land / air / water, that have become numb & atrophied due to years (or centuries) of repression, disuse, and contortion...

There is an Unleashing & Unfurling occurring now *but* There is Also a Backlash, and a Whole Lotta “Woke-Speak” (i.e., lip-service and intellectual rhetoric/“understanding,” with insufficient awareness, receptivity, dedication and accountability. We’re back to the Stamina issue...).

What will it take to usher us into our better selves at *Critical Mass*<sup>11</sup>? This is the question (or at least one of them): Do we need (another or worse?) dire crisis to wake us up (literally and figuratively)? I hope not; but maybe...

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10 This is totally a work in progress, and I realize there are some apples and bananas and pineapples and potatoes and cars here...

11 See the Glossary in the [Change Management & Deep Equity](#) publication.



## Movement Themes & Connections to “Regeneration”...

I’ve been marinating these topics for years in myself, with my colleagues and clients — (most of whom are white dominant orgs, with some exceptions). I love my work, and I see patterns rampant across the social change field. And while there is significant progress, I wonder if it’s adequate to the task of what we’re facing right now. Thankfully, I think yes 😊. *But* with what cost/price? That is, How much amputation, or cauterizing or harm, or other severe wounding will be needed for us to let go & **Wake Up at Critical Mass**? I don’t know but I do think the level of harm going forward is a Choice....

This is what I’m doing (or at least trying!) with my clients: *How much do you wanna keep banging your head against the wall vs. Letting Go & Leaping Into (perhaps) the Unknown for You?* But that so-called “unknown” is not ‘unknown’ for many of those whose talent & Wisdom has been repressed and inadequately shared for the benefit of the masses and the planet... That “unknown” may be familiar to some; (and for some, it’s even “ordinary”!). This is it: *If we partner effectively (and non-patronizingly), we can Craft and Walk the Path Forward Together.* If we don’t partner in this way (as most/many have been; but some/more are trying), the way forward will be harder (and sometimes a lot harder)... Choose. This is for a large % of us: A Choice.

This is an answer for each of you (of us) — That is: **What will unblock or unstick us is individual as well as patterned (at scale).** We have to discern and address these two levels of stuckness & blockages. The question becomes: Are we willing? (Or to what degree?) And what is the evidence of that? Are we kidding ourselves (and others)? And to what degree?...

**Regeneration practice and work, in my mind, has to do with Reawakening, Reknitting, Regrowing, Reconnecting, & Re-mending ourselves — individually and collectively.**

This is part of Epigenetics in my thinking, (though I may be misunderstanding some of the nuances of how this word is used in science). Nevertheless, this notion of being able to **Regenerate or Re-Realize/Re-Establish the Healthy State** (individually & collectively), is core to Dzogchen Buddhist practice — because we already have the blueprint (i.e., DNA), so *of course* we can Re-Establish (ourselves in) it. We just have to Re-Recognize it and Rest/Settle there...



This notion of **Flow** also has to do with **nourishment**, reaching our cells, promoting and allowing Regeneration — like water traversing through the roots; like lotion on our skin; like blood in our veins... Nutrients being carried in our arteries; carrying & bringing goodness; removing toxins; & ensuring appropriate circulation.

Sometimes when our knots are being untangled, it's jarring (or even temporarily painful) because we're so used to being tied up.<sup>12</sup> Intentional, purposeful tangling can be useful — (like when we do a *bind* in yoga asana poses; or when we are tying our shoes, or other knots to hold things together) — but not when such tangling is unconscious. We have to **build stamina, capacity & readiness for this greater flow**, and for what comes with it: deepening awareness and hence, deepening levels of accountability to the collective good, collective well-being, health & healing.

While there is much to be said about capacity, readiness<sup>13</sup> (including readiness *for what?*), **stages of readiness, accountability, and what can be realistically expected** at each stage, etc. — we must be cautious in attending to these areas without using the natural *developmental* process as a copout. This is back to “to whom much is given, much is expected.” That is, those of us in positions of power and authority *have more responsibility and accountability* for where we are in our development, and hence what we do and its impact.

This is true individually and collectively; and if we can't bring the goods / capacity needed (in the optimal timeframe), we sometimes need to make room for / cede the space (and support) those who can.... This is important.

**At the movement level** — (cross-organizational, cross-field, cross-community, transnational, etc. levels) — I think a lot about what it will take to *buttress the capacity of the movement to fully realize the magnitude of our visions* for health, healing, greatness, clarity and powerful, fierce and loving communities, (organizations, nations / countries, etc.). Untangling individually and collectively will be essential for this, *plus* deepening our capacity for a wild, unabashed, fierce & tender kind of love *for ALL of reality*, in all of its (at times) apparently ugly and beautiful forms. This love — (which is sometimes a sentiment, and sometimes an action, and sometimes a ceremony, or a myriad of other things...) — is the kind of love that can *actually melt*

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12 I first heard this notion of “knots” & untangling from one of my root Buddhist teachers, Bar-ché Dorjé.

13 See e.g., p.24-26 of the [Change Management & Deep Equity](#) publication.

*knots, no matter where they are or how tangled they may be (in us, between us, in organizations, among orgs, among peoples, etc.)...*

*...those of us in positions of power and authority have more responsibility and accountability for where we are in our development, and hence what we do and its impact.*

I think about (and work with others in partnership on) cultivating this stamina and capacity en masse so that we can actually *handle* the flow of *goodness & richness* when it comes; so we are not overwhelmed by it, or thrown off our center / groundedness by the unclogging of the hose (i.e., our individual and collective channels); by the *brightness* of the /our lights... So that we are not overwhelmed by the fecundity, profundity and *potency* of the FLOW itself; of what it feels like to actually be UNLEASHED, when our Bodhicitta is *fully* awake for the benefit of all...

I want to help cultivate this *for everyone, for always, for as long as there is need*, so that we can all be free. *Aché.*



# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

I offer here some reflection questions, of which you may choose to use all or none. They are offerings for your own private reflection to share or not share, as you decide. One exception to this is if some of your reflections could help the greater good, I want to encourage you to please skillfully share them, **especially if you have responsibility & accountability for advancing the greater good in any system.**

You may also want to refer to the [Overview of Equity in Institutional Change](#) below.

1. When and where have you experienced a healthy flowing state(s) in your own life?
  - a. How about in the systems, organizations, communities, groups, relationships, fields and ecosystems that you've been or are part of?
2. When have you felt disjointed, fragmented, contorted/kinks in your own hose — in your own life, body, emotions, mind, or your relationships, or the communities, groups and organizations that you are a part of?
3. What helped to unstick the blockages that you have healed, or helped to heal in the past?
  - a. How sufficient are/were your spiritual/energetic, strategic, systems, institutional, etc. practices and approaches (i.e., your “Windex” and “Drano”) – at individual and collective-level healing and unclogging?
4. What might help unstick the blockages in the systems that you are a part of now (however, big or small they might be...)?
5. How do “disproportionate burden,” “disproportionate & cumulative impact,” and “disproportionate responsibility” relate to your sense of solution pathways to unsticking and unclogging blockages & contortions to healthy flow in the systems that you are a part of?
6. How might such unclogging /unblocking promote greater states of Regeneration for you and for the systems, communities & groups you

- are a part of?
- a. (What about for our collective life on earth?)
7. What, if anything, feels too outlandish? And what seems super-practical and doable and accomplishable for you, in your lifetime?
    - a. How about in this *moment*?
    - b. How about *today*? How about *tomorrow*?
    - c. How about next *week*? How about next *month*?
    - d. How about next *year*? And so on?.....
  8. What other thoughts, feelings or sensations are you having right now?
    - a. (Are there any questions coming up for you?)
  9. What, if anything, is still stuck, contracted, and/or feels too risky, etc.? Why?...
    - a. What (if any) breakthroughs have you had?...

If you have somatic practices (dancing, physical movement meditations, etc.), and/or sound practices (song, mantra, vibrational, etc.), and/or practices in nature (with trees, animals, the soil, the elements, etc.) – you may want to engage them now to help promote **flow**, getting unstuck, and remaining connected with body, emotions, mind and others.





# OVERVIEW OF EQUITY IN INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE<sup>14</sup>

Equity includes but goes beyond a focus on “diversity” and “inclusion.” Deep Equity, in particular, focuses on multiple levels: *individual*, *interpersonal*, *institutional*, and *field/systemic/community/societal*. Equity, at depth, focuses on the historical and current supporting *structures, habits, policies, practices, and conditions* that lead to predictable, disproportionate opportunities, experiences, life circumstances, and outcomes for specific demographic groups of people. Equity at depth is most concerned with the cumulative impacts of power, privilege, differential burden, and resource distribution on individual and collective thriving, relieving disenfranchisement, and healing the impacts of daily assault as well as long-term, systemic inequity and trauma.

**Individual and interpersonal dimensions of Deep Equity** include: cross-cultural literacy; deepening capacity to have challenging conversations; recognizing unconscious bias, emotional triggers, power dynamics, and microaggressions; manifestations of inequity from an *intersectional* perspective (i.e., the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomics, age, language/dialect, LGBTQ identity, geography, immigration status, religion, etc.); and deepening capacity in physical and emotional healing and presence to remain open, curious, and engaged in emotionally-charged personal reflection and dialogue.

14 See p.21-22 of the *Change Management & Deep Equity* publication.

Some of you may also find valuable Maggie Potapchuk’s work on *Operationalizing Racial Justice* and her *Racial Equity Decision-making Tool (REDT)*.

*Additional areas at these first two (individual & interpersonal) levels include:* Values and (conscious and unconscious) beliefs about the worth, intelligence and capacity of dominant and non-dominant communities; becoming more aware of our thoughts, perceptions, biases, stereotypes, etc. about people and groups; family / group history, dynamics, and patterns; exposure, relationships, and the density of beyond-surface-level experience in cross-cultural contexts; and training, study, learning, and on-going communities of practice where we live, work, play, and learn, in order to deepen our equity understanding and capacity.

**Institutional dimensions** of Deep Equity include attention to *organizational climate, culture, structures, and processes* such as: Leadership, goals, planning, and policies; values and beliefs; programming and project foci; access and inclusion; collaboration, relationships, and trust (and structures that foster these); internal and external communication systems; personal and collective commitment and accountability; human resources; grantmaking approaches (if applicable); evaluation & success metrics and methodologies; fundraising, donor cultivation, financial management and investment approaches; field-building and partnership; and other areas.

Deep Equity also includes attentiveness to how **white** (and other) **dominant culture habits** may manifest at all of the levels above (*individual, interpersonal, institutional / organizational, and field / systemic / community / societal*), regardless of the identities of practitioners. The purpose in this “attention” is to *notice and transform* and / or *expand* dominant approaches to ways of being, doing, thinking, analyzing and communicating (among other areas), to **allow a wider variety of human manifestations to be perceived and recognized as valuable, intelligent, relevant and wise**. This moves beyond “good intentions” to include *awareness, skill, courage, deeper partnership*, and loving but rigorous *accountability*.

Often, institutions focus on *structural* and *technical* dimensions of **organizational functioning** (i.e., those that are more easily measured quantitatively), and usually attend insufficiently to the *social / relational, cultural, and political*<sup>15</sup> dimensions of equity and organizational functioning, because these require both quantitative as well as more nuanced qualitative approaches to assess and build capacity. All five dimensions of organizational functioning – **structural, technical, social/relational, cultural, and political** – must be addressed to pursue deep equity.

15 Adapted from education equity thought leader Jeannie Oakes (UCLA) from whom I first heard the relationship between the *structural, technical, cultural* and *political* aspects of shaping and transforming institutions. I have also heard National Equity Project use the term “*relational*.”



## AFTERWORD

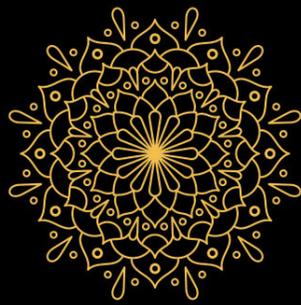
I want to acknowledge with profound gratitude my colleagues: Lisa Garrett, Corita Brown, Marcus Walton, and Marc Carr, who engaged in retreat with me in the fall of 2023 and helped to bring into further fruition some of this material, through their kindness and rigorous presence 😊. It was inspiring to be together.

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Additionally, I want to acknowledge Taj James, Co-Founder of Movement Strategy Center and Co-Founder and Curator of [Full Spectrum Labs](#). Taj and I had *many* conversations over the years about change, how to advance it, systems, strategy, spirituality, ourselves, catalyzing change agents, etc. His colleagueship has been pivotal for me; (and he may be the most profound strategist I have ever met...).

Finally, I want to acknowledge Stephen Rowe, my philosophy thesis professor from *many* years ago who I had the pleasure of reconnecting with in recent years. His influence on me and my thinking cannot be overestimated, especially about what is possible for humans. His kindness and generosity toward me can also not be overstated. There are those people in your life who you know you would not be yourself without; he is one of them. Deep gratitude; words cannot convey.





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