



LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

A WAY FORWARD: BUILDING BRIDGES FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW

By **Anonymous**

Setting the Scene: We haven't seen Mom in days but are not worried. Sometimes Mom experiences life as if she's always in a hurry. Everything is big, bubbly, and colorful when Mom's like this. We rush from one place to another to see if another world exists. Some people use the word mania and look a bit grim, but Mom is Mom and I love her in all her ways. Mom's gone for a while, and I wonder where she is.

"I want our movement to feel like a vibrant, accountable space where causing harm does not mean you are excluded immediately and eternally from healing, justice, community, or belonging." — Adrienne Maree Brown

Bam! The door is kicked in... I'm confused... I shelter my kin. Maybe it's Mom and she forgot her key... You're not my mom and it's not like her to be gone THIS long. I see large beings with big, dripping teeth... They refer to themselves as safe... help... police... social workers... but none of that means anything to me. They say Mom is in trouble and I think to myself what kind of trouble? And why are you in my house? They say it's not safe for me here and I look around... it's been safe this whole time and suddenly it's not??? They say there's no food, individual beds, and you can't be without an adult.

I comfort my siblings and tell them we'll be back soon. A strange lady opens her front door, I shield my siblings and notice trash bags. What are those? This was the first time I questioned my worth...is my life only worth some trash?

I was 4 or 5 when I was told I was saved from my scary Mom. She was painted as a monster, and I feared what I might become. Over the years I learned of a system filled with scary monsters that don't truly listen. They have their ways, outlook on life, and a mission designed without people like me in mind. When they come to the hood they don't think twice. Out come the fangs and our adults disappear to the land of the cage. Out come their masks when they claim they are saving the races. As a child these monsters are frightening. I visit Mom in a cage for the last time and they tell me that seeing her is unsafe, but the only unsafe monster I see are the carceral systems that ensnared us in its claws. I'm confused and sad because my outlook is forced to change... forced to survive a monster, I mean system, built to tear me limb to limb... I ingest a system that doesn't care if we die or live.

As it stands, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx families are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. Research shows this is largely due to economic instability and racial

"But if we want to create a world in which conflict and trauma aren't the center of our collective existence, we have to practice something new, ask different questions, access again our curiosity about each other as a species." — Adrienne Maree Brown



bias. The current child welfare system is working in its true design. Families are surveilled, and torn apart, and government aid isn't going where it's needed — to families in need.

When I sit and reflect, I take time to consider the experiences of my Ancestors, using their experiences to shape my dreams and reflections. The dreams and reflections include what life could look like if the system spent more time repairing and less time punishing. We invite you to dream with us by reflecting on the following questions:

If the system were to crumble tomorrow, what would you want to take its place? What emotions would you feel? What would it taste like, smell like, look like? How would your body feel stepping into this new world?

Before reading on, please take some time to consider your answers. Write them down, create a voice memo, make a note on your phone, or write yourself an e-mail.

When we envision a new world, we see a space of accountability and vulnerability. When someone experiences harm, they are empowered to name it for what it is instead of being shamed. Then, they are provided with a seat at the table to share space and co-create solutions and ways to heal the harm that has been faced. In a space of co-creation, community is also created, and relationships are strengthened through sharing conversation, food, and movement.

We believe we all carry a piece of this new world's wisdom because we are all impacted by harm somehow. Whether you are a systems-impacted person, someone working within the system, or are working to change the system from the outside, we invite and challenge **you** to tap into **your** wisdom and find **your** place in the work to build a new world. ■

Here are a few tips we believe will be helpful, and we challenge you to actively apply these in interpersonal, family, community, policy, and systems contexts:

SELF-REFLECTION: Develop a practice and make this a habit. Reflect as frequently as you are able. The best advocates and changemakers sit and reflect on how their feelings, behaviors, and actions impact the people around them.

CONTINUE TO LEARN: Remain curious even in a world that values "knowing" – it's okay not to know. The less we pretend to know when we don't, the more we're able to learn and grow.

FEEDBACK: Find people you can trust to give you real, honest reflections of how you show up. Seek feedback, accept it, and decide if/how you want to integrate it. Notice your reactions without judgment and exercise self-compassion for previous decisions you've made that may not align with who you are today.

PRACTICE AND INVEST: Get comfortable with these skills and get involved in grassroots organizing. Build relationships with the people in your community. Use these skills daily and pass them on to others within your personal and professional communities.

For folks working within the system, here are a few additional reflection questions:

1. How am I participating in creating a world that divests from carceral systems?
2. What communities am I accountable to? How do I hold myself accountable to them?
3. Am I in places and spaces building genuine relationships with the people I work with? Do I build authentic relationships with the people I work with?
4. Am I showing up as my authentic self in the places and spaces I enter?
5. Do I empower the community I serve by creating space at the table and uplifting their voice?