

THERE IS ANOTHER WAY

Ana-Maurine Lara

part one: survivor's rights & responsibilities

As a survivor of abuse, in any of its forms, I HAVE THE RIGHT TO:

1. NAME RAPE, INCEST, SEXUAL MOLESTATION, ASSAULT, BATTERY, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND ABUSE IN ALL ITS FORMS
2. FEEL ANGRY, HURT, SAD, LOVING, OR FORGIVING OF MY PERPETRATOR(S) AND ANY FRIENDS OR FAMILY WHO HAVE COLLABORATED WITH THE VIOLENCE
3. SPEAK ABOUT MY ABUSE
4. A SPACE TO REFLECT UPON MY PERSONAL HISTORY WITHOUT JUDGMENT
5. THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE THAT IS NECESSARY FOR SURVIVING TRAUMA
6. A SAFE AND SECURE HOME
7. SAFE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS, PARTNERS, LOVERS, AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

8. CONFRONT PERPETRATORS AND THOSE WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN VIOLATIONS AND ABUSES
9. LEAVE
10. TAKE ACTION TO STOP THE ABUSE
11. FEEL BEAUTIFUL AND LOVABLE
12. LOVE AND BE LOVED

As a survivor of abuse, in any of its forms, I HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO:

1. TAKE CARE OF MYSELF PHYSICALLY, MENTALLY, EMOTIONALLY, AND SPIRITUALLY—WHATEVER THAT MEANS FOR ME
2. REFLECT ON THE WAYS ABUSE HAS AFFECTED ME AND SEEK APPROPRIATE FORMS OF SUPPORT
3. UNDERSTAND THE SOURCES OF MY PAIN
4. INTERRUPT PATTERNS OF ABUSE AND SELF-ABUSE IN MY OWN BEHAVIOR THAT HURT ME AND/OR OTHERS
5. TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR MY CHOICES AND BEHAVIORS
6. REACH OUT TO OTHER SURVIVORS AS A SOURCE OF SUPPORT OR TO PROVIDE SUPPORT
7. LIVE MY LIFE TO THE BEST OF MY ABILITIES AND WITH THE GOAL OF REACHING MY FULL POTENTIAL
8. STAY PRESENT WITH MYSELF AND ALERT TO MY NEEDS
9. FORM HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS THAT NOURISH ME
10. CLAIM MY OWN DESIRE
11. ACCEPT MY BEAUTY, POWER, STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND HUMANITY IN THE WORLD
12. SURVIVE MY HISTORY, CIRCUMSTANCES, AND VIOLATIONS

part two: what i was thinking

This essay is written for me and other organizers who are survivors of abuse, in any of its forms. I write to make connections between our individual and collective experiences as survivors and our roles as organizers and community leaders.

For many years, with many friends and peers, I have had an ongoing discussion about the effects of abuse on ourselves, our relationships, and our community work. How do we intentionally manage processes of personal healing in relationship to the work of fighting on behalf of our communities? And, how do we name ourselves throughout these processes? Are we victims? Survivors? What are the politics of these identities? What do they indicate about how we feel about ourselves in relationship to our personal histories and the histories of our communities?

Stepping back to consider the larger picture, I want to acknowledge that as people of color, queers, and genderqueers, our histories of resistance are living proof that we do not accept institutionalized forms of violence as inherently true or valid, that we believe in our own worth and right to live life on our own terms. It is important for me to start there because my understanding is that when we extend the definition of oppression to include the exertion of violence in all its forms, we are extending it into an understanding that all forms of abuse are unacceptable, be they institutional racism, compulsive heterosexuality, police violence, date rape, or intimate partner abuse. In other words, if we consider the larger picture of the histories our communities have created through our struggles for survival, we can see that *we already have a basic framework for making the connections between our own individual experiences and those of our communities.*

This is my starting point. Please know that this essay is an attempt to create language for defining my own experiences and my own lessons. Here, I want to share (1) one example of how I survived abuse and the ramifications of my healing process on my community organizing work, and (2) my thoughts on the direct connection between our own resolutions around personal abuse and the ways we affect others as community organizers. Resolving our personal histories of abuse is a life-long process that is more like

walking around a well than down a straight road. But when we're aware of our pain, and work to uncover its sources, we become the best allies to our own healing, and can become stronger in our community work.

Without disavowing the incredibly important work of the domestic violence movement, I want to acknowledge that some of the most painful interactions I have experienced occurred in social service or community-based organizations working with survivors and the most disenfranchised members of our society. In the process of reflecting on these experiences (of how community isn't always a safe place), I decided to examine my own history of abuse and survival and the lessons I have learned in the process. I transformed my own lessons learned from surviving abuse into a sort of code for healing behavior in the world beyond myself; one result of that process was the "Survivor's Rights & Responsibilities" statement. For me, these "rights and responsibilities" have served as a guideline for personal and community healing. But I grew frightened that my discussion of the healing process in the language of personal rights and responsibilities could be misinterpreted as some statement about "personal responsibility," rather than what I had intended it to be: a call for considering the ways that violence and oppression work on us and our communities simultaneously, and how sometimes these appear in the actions and decisions of our leaders.

To clarify: healing from our personal experiences is not just a matter of personal health; healing is also a matter of social change. Our communities have suffered lifetimes of abuse: genocide, slavery, colonialism, massive incarceration and deportation, and police violence are only a few of the more obvious examples. The work required to undo the myriad internalized and externalized forms of oppression afflicting our communities is not just about what we do out in the streets, in nonprofits, or in community groups. It's also about how prepared we are to deal with the fallout from our personal experiences with violence. It's about how we treat ourselves and one another in the process. It is hard work to do this. It is really hard. But it is also necessary.

part three: an example from my own life

Many years ago, when I was 23, I dated a woman, "K," who was incredibly abusive—she tried to destroy my friendships, and she demonstrated small but increasing forms of physical violence that culminated in a gun threat. We worked together, and though we were in different buildings, after the destructive break up—which I initiated because I couldn't take her controlling behavior—she followed me around during work hours for about three months. I quit my job as soon as possible and made sure that I changed my social life to avoid the places where she hung out. This sucked for me, but I didn't want to risk seeing her. It didn't matter—"K" always figured out ways to find me.

The moment of personal fury and epiphany came almost two years later when she approached an acquaintance, let's call her "Sarah," and informed her of my so-called betrayal of her love. Sarah, someone with whom I was doing intense community work, was not familiar with the violence I had lived through with this woman. I had never felt the need to talk about "K"—I just wanted to forget about her. Sarah came over to my home one day telling me that they had spoken, and that I had a responsibility to ensure that all of our community was taken care of. I was so upset at the entire scenario: at "K" for trying to reach me through a friend, at Sarah for her one-sided request for my accountability, and at myself for having kept silent for so long. I turned pale. After taking an hour to calm down, to digest what had just happened, I explained to Sarah why I had broken off all communication with "K." Sarah, also a survivor of abuse, indicated that she understood. She started crying, having realized how she had been manipulated by "K."

However, a few months later, Sarah invited both me and "K" to a party, without informing either of us that the other person would be there. When I asked Sarah, whom I considered a close friend, why she had done this, she said it was not her responsibility to value one community member over the other. I left the party. I felt betrayed by Sarah, and I felt that I had been placed in danger. I didn't understand, until much later, how Sarah's own history of abuse manifested itself in the form of manipulating social relationships. I

didn't understand how her own blocks against confronting her own abuser meant that she constantly put her friends in situations where they were expected to be able to confront their abusers, even if they weren't ready to do so. From her perspective, she was healing our communities. From mine, she had created a context for potentially perpetuating violence.

If, prior to that moment, I had not done the work of taking care of myself, of ensuring my own safety and mental health, who knows what kinds of violence could have been perpetuated at that party. What if I had tried to confront my abuser and she had turned violent? What if my own anger materialized in the form of violence? The truth is, the community was small—especially that of queer organizers of color. We all knew each other. For me, after my relationship with “K,” it had been especially important that I take steps to ensure my personal safety and seek help from friends and counselors. It was especially important because I was working with other survivors, and with people going through abuse in that moment, abuse that is an ongoing reality within my communities. If I had not been working on getting solid on my own stuff, who knows what kind of energy I would have put out at that party, in that moment, with my community. Who knows what kind of energy I would have called forth while being triggered.

That incident became an important catalyst for discussions about partner abuse, as all of my friends who had been at the party realized something was going on. First, because we cared about each other, people noticed I left the party. Second, when folks asked me, days later, I decided to break the silence around what had happened with “K.” This in turn encouraged other women in our community to break the silence regarding their own experiences of abuse with “K.” When we realized there was a shared experience of violence, we created bridges to hold each other close, to safeguard ourselves and each other. We also created bridges to hold each other accountable, and to generate spaces of healing that were consensual and transparent.

After that night, I never saw “K” again (she recently found me on Facebook—I blocked her). In our community discussions, we asked ourselves to identify the roots of our pain, to define “community” and “community work.”

We asked ourselves what it meant to be accountable: how to differentiate loyalty from truth, and how to hold truth gently. We started to analyze the frameworks we were using to define our work. It became clear that a trust had been broken between Sarah and me, and that in order for the work to continue to be effective, we would have to heal and that trust would have to be restored. It became evident that typical movement models of mediation and community work were not what we were using, nor were they appropriate or adequate. What we were attempting required redefining accountability in terms of: practicing total honesty about where we were at emotionally and spiritually; putting the ugliest parts of ourselves out in front of our peers and trusting they would help us grow stronger; taking ownership of our mistakes; and recognizing being nice, loving, and kind as revolutionary values central to our work.

Those discussions at age 23 became super important for my development as a person, artist, and organizer. They were crucial to my understanding of the links between personal experience and community work. Through those shared moments and conversations, I began to understand that our personal experiences of abuse could serve as a road map for continuing or stopping the perpetuation of violent, oppressive behavior. I also understood that it is possible to be, simultaneously, both a survivor and a perpetrator, just as it is possible to be a racist queer, or a homophobic person of color. And that much in the same way we work to not perpetuate racism, we must also work not to perpetuate other forms of violence. There are other ways.

Truth-telling or confronting violence, as in the case of Sarah's party, does not have to be an abusive process, even if it touches deep hurts. The hurt of seeing the truth about ourselves and each other does not have to happen with abusive language or without consciousness around the power we hold in relationship to each other. Truthfulness with each other can lay the foundations for revolutionary consciousness, and for resolving the effects of abuse. Models generated by the most traumatized of our communities—communities of color, genderqueer communities, and genderqueer communities of color—can guide us toward the resolution of multiple forms of violence without reinscribing the

trauma that our society inflicts on us every day. We can learn ways to do this work without hurting those closest to us.

part four: what i dream of

Like abuse, resistance takes many forms. Sometimes it drives change, while other times the focus is survival. Sometimes the result is progress, even revolutionary change. Other times resistance is regressive or even colludes with oppression to create more oppression. I know, in my flesh, that my ancestors had no choice about their enslavement. But they did make choices about how to survive that enslavement. They chose profound spiritual power, subtle and direct forms of resistance (including fighting and dying) and, sometimes, participation in the system as overseers or slave owners themselves. Without confusing one context for another, I think history highlights how in our personal and communal lives we can choose to resist through active or passive means, through participation or collusion. We all make choices about how to handle our past and present circumstances, even in the most oppressive conditions. And even when we are powerless over our circumstances, we can still tap into the deepest parts of our own humanity for our own survival.

I want to be clear that I am not talking about having a choice in our circumstances. Rather, I am talking about what we do *with* our circumstances. Our awareness of our circumstances and how to deal with them is what makes us powerful leaders and organizers in contexts that have much wider berth than enslavement. Even with a gun to our head, we have to imagine and act with a desire for the best possible outcome. When we enter into leadership positions (as organizers or otherwise), we must acknowledge what that power means; often, it means that we have choices and responsibilities. That the first choice we made was to put our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits on the line for a greater good. And that after that first choice, we are accountable for our decisions and our actions. We are choosing to address our own survival, and the survival of our communities, with the tools at our disposal. And as we look out over a field full of greys, we have to first look down to see where we ourselves are standing.

Our ability to make choices is also different from our feelings, our emotions. As human beings, we can't determine how we're going to feel about a given set of circumstances. We are entitled to all of our feelings, but we can determine how we will act once we become aware of them. When someone abuses us, it is usually because that person has made a choice to engage in destructive behavior. We can't account for other peoples' choices, but we also don't have to tolerate their justifications. As organizers, we can stop destructive behavior in all its forms by confronting abuse inflicted by others, and by confronting our own abusive behavior toward others.

As organizers, I know that we don't let racism, transphobia, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, ableism, or classism stop our work or our collective calls for justice. (In fact, these forms of oppression often form the premise for our work in the first place!) And I know that, as organizers, we actively seek to unearth internalized forms of oppression and the particularly insidious effects of internalizing oppression on our health and movements. From direct observation and from my readings, I know that people who have survived some of the most profound forms of oppression are often the most powerful and necessary leaders of our movements. However, many of us fail to consider how partner abuse—as one of the most intimate forms of oppression—might function within us, become internalized, in the same way that the -isms do. Many of us do not examine the connection between internalized oppression and the violence we inflict and suffer within our own besieged communities. In other words, we often fail to consider the public weight of our personal histories. Many times, we justify our own abusive patterns by using our status within a community, or isolating the truth tellers who reveal our pain. Many times, we allow for the abuses because we are desperate: the work demands that we be alert and ready to respond to crisis at any moment. The work demands that our most brilliant members mentor us, teach us, guide us, and facilitate our own development, even if the way they go about doing it is fucked up.

I can think of many examples of this, but I'll cite one which has stuck with me for a long time. Several years ago, I went to a conference on violence

in communities of color. I sat in the audience, excited that one of my heroes, a veteran queer Chicana leader, was about to speak. I then watched as she yelled, in public and abusively, at a young Native American woman who was simply trying to set up her microphone. We then listened to her justify, to a room of 3,000 women of color, her behavior with the fact of her status in the movement. Needless to say, I was deeply saddened with her choice about how to deal with her frustration. I wanted to remind her that we, all of us in that room, were not the enemy, and that her frustrations about the world would be held in that space. I (and maybe we) was also reminded that the pain of our experiences of violence is always with us, and sometimes, despite our best intentions, we become the vector for perpetuating that violence. I wanted to have compassion for her, but I was mad, and it took me a long time to forgive her transgression. That was okay. I still don't think it's okay that she yelled at a sister like that, but I can only hope she (and everyone who silently witnessed this) learned from that experience, too.

As organizers and leaders, we know we have great responsibilities in assuring constructive social change, and we are aware of the constant pressure of self-development. However, we cannot ignore the impact of our own personal histories on how we approach the work. We cannot forgo our personal health and expect it will not affect our communities. For example, how many times have we seen an organizer who's sick and "toughing it out" instead of going home to rest? For paid organizers, how many times have they been told they won't get paid on sick time, or that they are not doing enough if they don't pull more than their weight? What about this scenario is about control and perpetuating larger forms of violence? What about this scenario is simply survival? We must take care of ourselves as part of ensuring our collective survival. Because we are, all of us together, the community, and this radical mindfulness is the work, the reason we organize in the first place.

It is my hope that as direct or indirect survivors of abuse, we don't also allow our experiences of abuse to become *the* pattern for our interactions with others. It is my hope that we choose to heal and to do things in ways that fo-

ment healthier communities, rather than broken ones. It is my hope that as leaders we become models of healing. It is my hope that we, as organizers and leaders, stand on equal footing with one another and others. It is my hope that we, as organizers and leaders, live with enough humility to apologize and approach change within ourselves and our communities as possible. It is my hope that, as organizers and leaders in our movements, we take care of ourselves so that we are available for the long haul.

If we *don't* take care of ourselves as leaders in our movements, or deal with our own histories, how can we be emotionally and mentally prepared to interact with each other in ways that don't replicate the abuse that is familiar and present within our interactions? The personal is deeply political, and not just in terms of identity, but in terms of how we live our lives and do our work as agents of social change.

part five: the imperative tense

In truth, I feel a sense of urgency around all of this. I am now in my thirties, watching yet another generation of young people being abused within our movements. I am seeing that the foundations I helped build in my twenties were not maintained in my communities; those of us who were doing this work ten years ago are watching the wheel get reinvented, without acknowledgment of what has already been done. In other words, the machinations of oppression are alive and well, and, simultaneously, those of us who have stepped up or have been entrusted with doing the work, no matter what our age, must deal with ourselves. We don't have time to watch another generation experience trauma at the hands of movement leaders. We cannot lose the next generation of organizers to the violence of those who are so hurt and tired that they know only to push people to the breaking point. We are living in a state of extreme crisis that is coming at us from all sides. How will we choose to treat and be with each other in ways that will continue to ensure our individual and collective survival?

To lay the groundwork for deeper liberation, we must ensure the perpetuity, health, and safety of our communities. As communities, we must find

the existent models, rediscover old models, and create new models for ensuring our healing. Put another way, we must do much more than survive. I am asking that those of us who are survivors use our experiences to create these maps with integrity, love, truthfulness, gentleness, and a vision for assuring the dignity and safety of our collective humanity. I am asking that we do the hard work needed to leave the destructive patterns behind and trade them in for new ones, that we survive our histories and circumstances, and allow ourselves to feel beautiful and be loved so that we can create beauty and love for each other.