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- Analysis

# WE NEED TO BUILD A MOVEMENT THAT HEALS OUR NATION'S TRAUMAS

If we don't have an unwavering commitment to healing as we mobilize this election season, we will always be in crisis.

Kazu Haga October 27, 2020

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As we head into what may be the most chaotic election in our lifetime, many people on all sides of the political aisle are reeling from anxiety and responding from a place of panic. With many of us on the left organizing for mass mobilizations and actions in the post-election season, we must make sure that we are doing so from a grounded place to ensure that we are not adding more panic to the world.

To ensure this, we have to have some understanding of how panic and trauma work in our own bodies, and then see what we can learn from that about how trauma is working in our *collective* body — this thing we call the United States of America.

## Panic and trauma

“It happened 20 years ago, I’m over it.”

For most of my life, that's what I had told myself about some traumatic experiences I went through as a child. "That was ages ago." "It wasn't a big deal." "I've moved on."

That changed when I spoke about it out loud for the first time. I was attending a week-long transformative retreat called a Jam, and was moved to share my story in a circle, not thinking too much of it. As soon as the words came out of my mouth, they fell onto the floor with the weight of an anvil. I completely broke down. I went into panic, and I could barely get a breath in while I was trying not to choke on my own tears.

I had no idea. No idea how much pain I was still holding over these experiences, and no idea how heavy the weight of shame was that I had been carrying for all of these years. How could I not have known? And how did this unknown weight impact my health, all of my relationships, my abilities for intimacy and authenticity? How could I have even thought about what would bring me healing if I didn't even realize that I needed healing in the first place?

We need to have the courage to speak our deepest truth and excavate the darkest parts of our country's history.

From that moment, I realized that this was a conversation that I needed to have with my family. A conversation that had remained hidden in open sight for two decades. I knew that opening up this conversation would be the start of a healing process in my own family that we all desperately wanted. And I was scared out of my mind. Out. Of. My. Mind.

For years, I knew this was something I needed to talk to them about, and for years, it was the scariest thing I could think of in my entire life. For about eight years, I carried that with me while I worked on my own healing. Therapy, writing, group processes, holding space for others to heal through their traumas. All the while, I knew I was preparing myself for "the conversation." And it took eight years of hard work before I was in a place where I was ready to open it up, and confident enough in my ability to hold a container for my family's response to it.

When I finally had that conversation with them, I was still scared out of my mind. Looking back at it, I can still feel the tension in my body. There was no way to know how they would respond. But I had an unwavering faith that if I was able to stay true to myself, and to speak honestly and vulnerably about *my experience* and the impact that it had on me, that it would bring about healing.

It was a conversation about our core, childhood trauma. About what seeded so much of the pain and separation that we would all experience as a family. In some ways, it was the thing I least wanted to talk about.

And *that* is what this country is needing to do, and attempting to do right now. To excavate and look at our collective core, childhood trauma. To face the reality that in the early, formative years of the founding of this nation-state, we experienced two of the grossest forms of violence human beings can enact on each other — genocide and enslavement. And both of these things were carried out on a systemic level.

As a family, we had never talked about the traumatic years of my early childhood. Sure, in some small, hidden ways there were whispers of it. I would share my story with friends. My sisters would mention something to each other in passing. There would be murmurs and rumors spoken one-on-one. But as a family, we never dove into it. And so the trauma that we all experienced got frozen and stuck.

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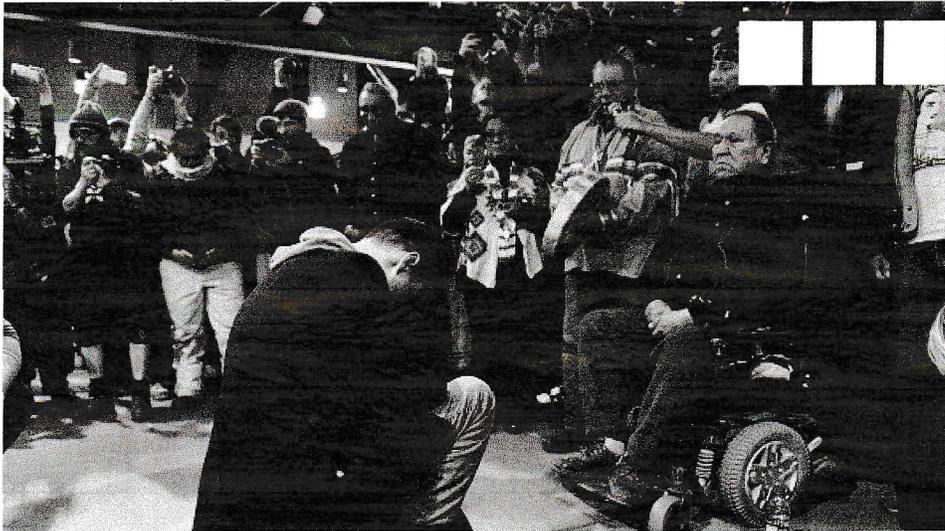
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As a family, we don't argue much, and we all deeply love and care about each other. And yet, because there was a pervasiveness to the unhealed trauma that we all carried, our relationship never felt as deep or authentic as we wanted. There were countless ways in which we continued to reenact that trauma, by harming each other as well as ourselves.

As a nation, we have never talked about the traumatic years of our collective childhood. Sure, in some small, hidden ways there were whispers of it. We would talk about it in activist spaces. Radicals would read books about it and have healing rituals. There would be murmurs and rumors spoken in progressive circles. But as a nation, we have never dove into it. And so the trauma that we all experienced got frozen and stuck.

As a nation, that trauma has led to generations of cycles of harm. Slavery of African peoples gave way to the convict leasing system, which gave way to Jim Crow, which gave way to mass incarceration. Everything from racial microaggressions to the killing of unarmed Black people grows out of this context.

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Physical genocide of Indigenous peoples gave way to cultural genocide through boarding schools, spiritual genocide through the destruction of sacred land, and economic genocide through the reservations system. Standing Rock and the battles to change racist names and mascots of sports teams comes out of this context.

We need to have the courage to speak our deepest truth and excavate the darkest parts of our country's history, to talk about the things that this country least wants to talk about.

### **Bad healing is re-traumatizing**

The willingness to open up a hard conversation alone is not necessarily healing. In fact, when done poorly, it can be re-traumatizing. It can isolate people even more, bring up more shame, cause more harm and shut people down.

About a year before my experience at the Jam, I began to have an inkling that there was some stuff that I needed to work through around my childhood. Not knowing what would happen, I shared a little bit of my story with a friend. Unfortunately, that friend was deep in her own trauma and did not have the skills to hold me in that moment. It's possible that my story may have even triggered her own trauma, and she responded by saying something that was deeply hurtful to me.

I was devastated. The message I told myself in that moment? Never again. Fuck that, I am never being vulnerable again. I am never sharing this story again, and it is not safe to open up.

It was the safe container created at the Jam that gave me the courage to try again. It was the fact that it was happening in a contained space, with skilled facilitators holding each conversation with great care and compassion among people who had been building deep trust over a period of several days.

Whether we all want it or not, whether we're ready for it or not, we are having a very public conversation about the historical traumas of this nation. The bandages that have been keeping these wounds hidden are being ripped off every time a confederate monument is torn down.

And from a trauma healing perspective, I am concerned that we may not be responding to it in the way that gives us the most potential for healing.

An operation needs a skilled surgeon, and the conversation that this country desperately needs right now requires skilled healers and grounded energy.

When a conversation is opened up about a historical harm that caused trauma, responding with a sense of blame and shame is not conducive to healing. I work with people in prison who have caused incredible harm. And if I went into any of those spaces pointing my fingers, calling them criminals and shaming them for their actions, they will never heal. Therefore they will never be able to hold themselves truly accountable, since they will always be shut down and defensive.

What is the energy that is driving a lot of our movement spaces and our public discourse? Do we experience energies of blaming, shaming and even dehumanizing the "other side"?

Part of it is that people — marginalized Black and Brown communities the most — are experiencing harm *right now*, and we need power and assertiveness to stop the harm. Stopping the immediate harm is a prerequisite to healing, which is a long-term process.

But we are so used to only seeing examples of "power over," that we often times conflate "power" with "abuse." We mistakenly believe that having power means being able to force our will over another.

Part of it is also that if we are experiencing a trauma response ourselves, we are not in a place to be able to hold space for the healing of other people's traumas. For so many of us, 2020 has been a series of traumatic events. And again, if you come from a marginalized identity, you didn't need 2020 to remind you that you are carrying trauma.

I knew that until I got to a certain place in my own healing journey, I was not going to try to open up this conversation with my family. If I got too triggered and was not able to stay grounded, rather than speaking

vulnerably from a place of truth, I may have spoken unskillfully from a place of trauma. There was no way that I was going to be able to be in service to our collective healing if that was the case.

An operation needs a skilled surgeon, and the conversation that this country desperately needs right now requires skilled healers and grounded energy. The deep levels of state violence that this country has continually perpetuated has been building up so long that we require immediate triage. The disease of colonization and white supremacy has boiled over. We may not be completely prepared and the conditions may not be ideal, but we need to operate right now.

### **Nonviolent action as trauma healing**

This operation is happening all over the country, in skillful and unskillful ways. Every protest and direct action is an attempt at opening this dialogue. Public discourse is opening this dialogue. Social media is opening this dialogue.

It doesn't take a lot of skill to open up a wound, but it requires great care to dig around inside the wound, cut out the disease and stitch that wound back up. Anyone can ask or even force a person to talk about their most painful experience. But it takes great care to move that conversation in the direction of healing.

What do we need to do to build a movement and engage in a discourse where we are moving in the direction of healing our nation's traumas?

#### **1. Do our own work: trauma, grief and rage**

We need to be doing our own work. In the long-term, that means doing the hard work of excavating the darkest corners of our own hearts, having the conversations that we least want to have, healing ourselves from our childhood traumas, holding ourselves responsible for the ways in which we've internalized white supremacy, patriarchy and other patterns that cause harm.

The more trauma we hold, the easier it is for us to get triggered and thrown off-kilter. And in escalated spaces — be it at a demonstration or in a heated debate on social media — we are even more likely to be triggered.

**Previous Coverage**



Fighting

injustice can trigger trauma — we need to learn how to process it and take healing action

If the doctor who is performing your operation is sick with a high fever, that's not ideal. As social change advocates, we are doctors trying to heal the wounds of a sick society. And we need to be right ourselves so that we can be in a position to help heal others.

On a collective level, this means that we need to create more spaces for collective healing and the tending and honoring of grief and rage. We are harmed in community, and therefore the healing should also be in community. If we do not create safe containers to process and release our rage and grief, they could be released in the streets or in some online debate. Neither are places that are conducive to healing, so we need to be more intentional about creating spaces that are explicitly for working with unprocessed rage and grief.

Grief and rage are powerful emotions, and as scary as it can be to feel into them or to hold space for them, we cannot turn away from them. We need to honor them. In many nonviolent spaces, I too often see a fear of dealing with grief, or judgment against expressions of rage. But they are both legitimate responses to injustice.

Sometimes, a fire is so powerful that we need to create space for an inferno to rage. And if that can happen in a safe container, that inferno can burn down into a charcoal, and it's that charcoal that we carry into direct action with us. A charcoal still connects us with our righteous indignation, but it is now safer for us to hold and easier for us to channel in the right direction. It is focused. It is concentrated. And it requires us lighting a blaze to create.

## 2. Practice emotional regulation

Second, in the short term we need to be practicing emotional regulation tools. This has to start with learning to have awareness of our bodies so that we can notice when we are triggered. Mindfulness and somatic practices can be great for this.

Take a moment right now. See if you can notice your body. How are you seated? Can you feel the weight of your body against the chair? Are you breathing slowly or taking short breaths? Are you hot? Where are you feeling

heat? Are you holding any tension? Or perhaps lightness? If so, where? See if you can sit for a minute and focus all of your attention on the area in your body where you feel it. Breathe into it.

Taking even just 30 seconds to notice how you're feeling multiple times throughout the day can help you build awareness about how you are *in this exact moment*.

Once we begin to identify the moments when we are triggered, we can bring in our emotional regulation tools. They can include things like taking a few deep breaths, talking to somebody or naming things out loud that you see around you. Check out this two-page handout that lists several more strategies that you can implement on the spot to help you regulate.

It's important to note that the more we practice these regulation tools *before* heading to an action, the more effective they are. After years of meditation practice, I can get *a lot more* out of one deep, intentional breath than I was able to before.

I want to see movements that are grounded enough that we never lose our creativity.

Have you ever been in a tense moment, when the simple presence of somebody with a deeply loving, grounded energy helped to release your tension? This is because we all have what are called mirror neurons. Many animals have the ability to sense another being's emotions and mirror them, to feel the way they do even if you have not had the same experience. So if one person has a very strong, grounded energy, it can literally fire neurons in our own brains that can ground us.

Now imagine what kind of an energy field might be generated if 10, 15, 20 people can bring that kind of grounded energy into the midst of an escalated direct action. How might that influence the field of that action space?

What if we can engage in an escalated form of direct action with 200, 300 or 1,000 people who can all bring that kind of grounded energy into the occupation of a government building or public space? What kind of field could be generated then? And what kind of transformation could that lead to?

### **3. See beyond the binary**

When we are acting out of our trauma response, we are unable to see nuance and complexity, everything becomes black and white, we lose access to creativity and compassion, our heart rate increases and we become less grounded. None of those things are ideal for healing.

Once we start working on our own shadows, we may realize that we are not as "woke" and unassailable as we thought. We may see how much violence we've internalized, and how much harm we ourselves are causing. This humility can help us see beyond the good vs. bad binary, where we are the "good" people trying to fix the "bad" racists over there.

This simplistic, binary way of thinking is oftentimes a sign of stress or trauma, and it is, as one Indigenous teacher once told me, "the most pervasive way our minds have been colonized by the state."

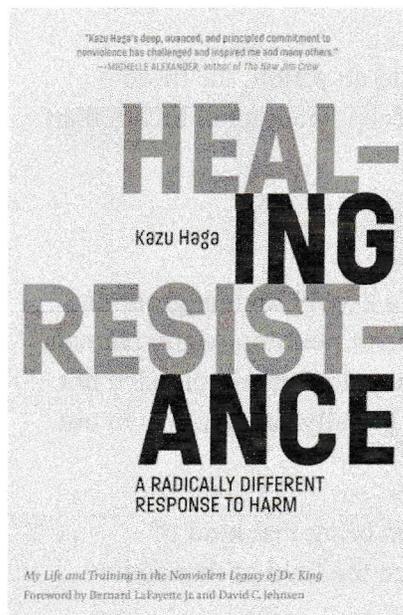
### **4. Reimagine direct action**

Another thing that happens when we are operating from our trauma response is that we lose our creative energy. When we are operating from our survival mechanism, we don't have the time to be creative. We respond with fight, flight or freeze.

I want to see movements that are grounded enough that we never lose our creativity.

My friend Nirali Shah has been teaching me a lot about the importance of beauty in activist spaces. That we need to create movements that embody the thing we want to see in the world. And how often do we see beauty in spaces of resistance?

Of course there are countless examples of this throughout history. But I also know that during the most heightened times in our society, when the battles escalate and there is more tension in the air, beauty tends to decline.



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I have noticed over the years that the more we escalate our tactics of nonviolent action, the more we tend to escalate the binary black/white, us vs. them worldview — the very worldview that is, in my opinion, at the heart of what is destroying our planet.

And yet these escalated times require an escalated response. So how do we escalate our tactics while remaining grounded enough to double down on healing, beauty and reconciliation? How do we use tactics of “shutting it down” while leading with an spirit of “opening things up”? As the elders at Standing Rock reminded us, how do we make direct action ceremony?

That kind of action requires a creativity that is only accessible to us when we are grounded.

### 5. Commit to healing

Above all else, I long to be in resistance spaces that have an unwavering commitment to healing. Of healing our own traumas, of healing our relationships to each other within movements, of healing our relationships to each other as peoples and of healing our relationship to the Earth.

An incarcerated trainer that I work with in Soledad State Prison once told me that “resolving a conflict is about fixing issues, and reconciling a conflict is about repairing relationships.” We can fix all the issues we want, pass all the laws and policies we can imagine, but until we are committed to the healing of relationships, we will always be in crisis.

So even as we may need to use escalated tactics to stop the immediate harm that is happening, I want us to always remember that our North Star is a reconciled world with justice for all people.

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## KAZU HAGA

Kazu Haga is the founder of the East Point Peace Academy, a core member of the Ahimsa Collective and the Yet-To-Be-Named Network, and the author of the book, "Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm." He has been active in social change movements since the age of 17, and facilitates nonviolence, restorative justice, mindfulness and organizing workshops in prisons and communities across the country.

FIGHTING INJUSTICE CAN TRIGGER TRAUMA — WE NEED TO LEARN HOW TO PROCESS IT AND TAKE HEALING ACTION

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