

FOREWORD

How Trouble Becomes the Thread of a Whole and Meaningful Life

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I was asked to speak to the root causes of the disproportionate representation of boys and men of color in the justice system in America; in particular, the representation of Latino males and important contextual factors specific to this population (e.g., poverty in communities, families, schools, gangs, trauma of community violence, immigration, cultural identity and spirituality).

The roots for the disproportionate number of young men of color in the justice system are economic, political and historical—this includes the vast and growing Latino population. The main issue facing these populations is poverty. The poor are largely powerless and moneyless. This often translates to young men as hopeless, helpless, rootless and eventually (as a summation of all these propensities) meaningless. They are more likely to join gangs, indulge in substance abuse, leave school and/or work in low-paying, largely undignified jobs. This is true for all poor, regardless of color. In relation to Latinos of color (i.e., black, Native/brown or mixed), they also face discriminatory barriers based on race, language and immigrant status.

When the United States underwent a historical transition from industrial production to high tech/digital production in

the 1970s and 1980s, most inner city jobs were sourced out of the country or displaced by robotics. Cynically, a collusion of government, economic and political forces opened the flood-gates to drugs, especially during the period of a “war on drugs” begun under Nixon’s presidency and continued with Reagan, although both Democrats and Republicans have sustained this travesty to the present.

At the same time, firearms, including from foreign wars, inundated the urban core of most cities, eventually spreading to suburbs and rural communities. Then civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s—involving U.S. funding and training—led to an influx of refugees as well as from increasingly economically strapped (and politically corrupt) Mexico and Honduras.

With lack of decent paying jobs, the drug trade became the “economic” life in poor and marginal communities, especially those most hit by de-industrialization (e.g., Los Angeles and Chicago, being the most prominent, but also Detroit, Washington D.C., Baltimore, New York City, San Antonio, Phoenix, Albuquerque and others).

These motive forces led to increased gang involvement across the spectrum. In 1980 there were 2,000 gangs with 100,000 members in around 300 cities; today there are an estimated 1.5 million gang members in 35,000 gangs in some 5,000 cities and towns. By the numbers, Latinos have more gang-affiliated youth than any other group (disproportionately, African Americans are most active in gangs). Latino gangs include the oldest continuous street gangs among Chicanos in such places as Los Angeles and El Paso, but also Puerto Ricans in New York City and Chicago, as well as more recently arrived Central American/Caribbean refugee youth.

The U.S. government’s response has been punitive. The greatest investment in prison building reached its peak in the

1990s (mostly during the Clinton Administration). By 2014 the United States had 25 percent of the world's prisoners, although it is only 5 percent of the world's population.

Today the federal government's budget for the drug war—largely declared a failure by most Americans—is \$25 billion, with a third of this going to local law enforcement. Police disproportionately target Black and Latino males (Blacks are four times more likely to get arrested for drug offenses than whites), even as medical and recreational marijuana use has been allowed in California, Colorado, Washington and other states. Again, this is a double standard—the growing legalization of marijuana presently benefits largely well-off white communities, not the poor or black and brown.

As the largest state prison system, California has a \$10 billion annual budget. Forty years ago the state had 15,000 prisoners, mostly white, in 15 institutions—today it has 130,000 prisoners in 34 institutions, 70 to 80 percent of color. As Michelle Alexander has written, this is the new “Jim Crow.”

Correspondingly, America has adopted some of the most harmful of punitive law enforcement, criminal/juvenile justice policies and practices harming communities of color (e.g., Three Strikes, trying children as adults, Zero Tolerance and School Expulsion policies, Gang Data Bases, Drug and Gang Enhanced Sentencing). These are the result of widely held mainstream fears based on divisive conservative misinformation campaigns, such as the now debunked “Super-Predator Myth.” Such myths have created a blanket indictment of presumed criminality for black and brown youth and men, hence giving rise to the context and social values that underlie the present reality.

In Los Angeles, there are now around 40 gang injunctions affecting 70 communities, all black and brown. Gang injunctions arrest whole neighborhoods, where alleged gang mem-

bers cannot congregate, show tattoos, have cell phones, and must be in their homes at dusk or be subject to police detainment, photographing, database entry and arrest. California implements gang injunctions in mostly areas slated for gentrification. Similar laws exist elsewhere, such as “mob action” in Chicago and “stop-and-frisk” in New York City.

Three-strike laws, gang and gun enhancements, zero tolerance, school removals and such are also used most often against black and brown residents, fueling the massive prison industrial complex. Fear engendered by misinformation continues to be the underlying reason why many voters may still continue to support such measures, even though they have only made gangs stronger and better organized.

Due to the squeezing of urban core communities through punitive measures and gentrification—the re-alignment of wealth back to the city, removing black, brown and poor people, including the tearing down of 1940s federal housing projects—gangs are now spread around the country.

With deportations heightened since the 1990s, U.S.-based gangs, mostly from L.A. and Chicago, are now active in other parts of the world. The most salient is the impact of 700,000 allegedly criminally involved immigrants that since 1996 have been sent back to Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (the latter countries are known as the Northern Triangle and have the world’s highest murder rates)—enough to change local cultures in these countries.

The facts keep proving that more policing and prisons only create more gangs, violence and uncertainty. I contend the bloated prison and drug war budgets have made our communities unsafe. “Tough on crime” doesn’t work. It’s tougher—and more effective—to care for youth, male and female; to provide help to traumatized communities, broken families; to bring jobs and training to unproductive lives; to expand rehabilitation,

drug and mental health treatment, education; to establish healing circles, restorative justice and proper initiatory community-based practices. These are also far less costly.

Certainly, the Latino and Black communities, particularly males, have been harmed by the existing negative racial bias in law enforcement, sentencing and the draconian punishment-focused justice model. The fact is all males are harmed by any negative obstructions to their growth, health and learning. Punitive measures harm people. They have caused a precarious and dangerous environment in this country. When mixed with racial, gender or sexual orientation bias, as well as economic and other barriers, youth are subjected to multiple stressors. Little wonder some of them lose it—become suicidal, addictive, criminals.

People are not animals or numbers. Nobody's humanity or dignity should ever be taken away. Even if a youth has done a horrendous crime, the community (manifested as society, laws and courts, etc.) should hold the ground with lasting principles, maintaining its center and never stooping to being narrow-minded, emotionally wrought adults. I've been in many courts, schools, juvenile lockups and prisons. While there are many upstanding and caring personnel in these institutions, I've also seen emotional outbursts from representatives of courts and institutions, inhumane treatment, subhuman torture (including solitary confinement) and more.

Whatever happened to initiatory practices, rites of passage, mentoring, relationships that last? Whatever happened to resources for those suffering from family abuse, broken schools, neglected communities? People need help; properly helped they become less helpless. We have taken away the power of people to make decisions, influence public policy, to contribute in positive ways. This is often exhibited as less personal power. High expectations require high patience.

Deep disconnection is the main motive force for the growth in school shootings (mostly by white middle-class alienated youth) as well as gangs, dropping out of schools, giving up.

For Latino males these barriers, laws and biases have created “monsters,” in the sense of mutated human beings. They can be helped, change is possible, but everything points to losing trust in human capacities; denying the abundant good inherent in people, the power of nurturing relationships and our spiritual nature. America needs a new imagination, a new model, a new cosmology to guide our work with the most troubled youth. Trouble either makes a community or destroys it. What we do makes the difference.

The concept of a “School-to-Prison Pipeline” has been introduced to the national dialogue. The premise is that schools and the institutions of education in impoverished communities have failed, creating the circumstances and/or pathways to prison for young men of color. Dealing with this stark reality is the central focus of President Obama’s “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. Reducing the clear racial disparity of educational achievement, incarceration and recidivism rates are MORAL and PRACTICAL imperatives for America.

People have said the present instability and crisis have moral roots. That’s true, but mostly because there’s a huge gap between what we say and what we do. We are largely a Christian nation, perhaps the most Christian in the developed world, yet we continue to have death penalties; life sentences, including for juveniles; inhumane and sterile electronic prisons; and racial/class biases in convictions and sentencing. We continue to have growing income disparities and injustices. That’s the capitalist economy and the system of governance linked to it—not Christianity.

Where's the moral outrage? Most Christians are supportive of such measures, totally at odds with the "what Jesus would do" mantra. The Jesus in the Gospels loved, healed, went up against the rich and powerful, the corrupt and appeased, but we turn away from fourteen-year-olds facing 135 years (I've seen this) and police beatings, killings and abuse of power.

Now among some powerful churches, Jesus is a Republican, a cowboy, a redneck. You don't believe me—in a Waco, Texas cemetery there is statue of Jesus with cowboy boots!

Jesus is not a Republican redneck, but people who lie about their God will lie about anything. We need true Christian values and love, not the ones hi-jacked by the Christian right.

Young people have a built-in B. S. meter. They can see and feel the hypocrisy. They are hungry for authenticity, truth that lasts, meaningful and respectful relationships with adults. While I am no longer a Christian (although raised Catholic), I do live the values of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." I also understand the truths expounded by Buddha, Mohammed, Black Elk and others. They all have validity, although I can also discern how people have from time to time misrepresented and misapplied these teachings.

Jesus said it best, as quoted in Matthew 7:12: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." Even non-Christians can agree. Let's make this both the moral and practical imperatives of our words, actions and law. "On Earth as in Heaven."

Instead, we have man-made illusions like the "free market," "mortgages," "borders" and the wage system, and made them bigger and more sacred than Jesus (or we've forced Jesus' life and teachings into these relatively recent and narrow developments). Even Karl Marx said, "An invitation to abandon illusions about a situation is an invitation to abandon a

situation in need of illusions.” I’m with the youth—“be real.” Consumerism, profits, war, guns, hate—these have become our Gods.

It is a positive development that California and other states are beginning to ask questions about the premise of our juvenile justice system. Communities are organizing to reform what the core values and guiding principles of the criminal and juvenile justice systems in America should be. What should these values and guiding principles be? What does a restorative or holistic justice approach look like?

While banks, corporations, energy companies, high-tech companies can poison the earth; while they can “nickel and dime” us to death; while the one percent can maintain control no matter who is elected; while we can lose our homes, our health and justice; while the rich get richer, the poor get prison; we are told to be compliant, don’t rock any boats, to keep shopping.

I can’t and I won’t.

The criminal justice system is unjust and bloated. Taxpayers are providing “schooling” in prisons—when they don’t have programming, rehabilitation or healing—for better-organized and effective criminals. Now gangs are more businesslike, and big businesses have become more like gangs.

Our values should be that trouble in youth is the very material to make a life; that everyone is born with genius; that every person must be allowed to live out their passions, destinies, stories; that abundance is the natural state (while scarcity is man-made and unnatural); that change is constant; that regeneration of people, environment and economies is endemic to whole and connected relationships.

It’s about alignment, integrality, wholeness.

These are indigenous ideas, ancient ideas. But they apply under all conditions, even the modern ones. I’m not against

progress, development, new technology. I'm against losing our core values as humans, our perennial philosophies, to the most immediate, static and literal ones. We've lost the mythologies, stories and metaphors to teach and direct us.

Imagine a new world where thriving and affirming communities exist everywhere. Imagine changing our values from "dog eat dog," "kill or be killed," or "only the strong survive" to this: The whole and healthy development of anyone is dependent on the whole and healthy development of everyone.

There is growing empirical evidence of the devastating negative impact of the criminal and juvenile justice systems on the life chances of boys and young men of color in America. Prisons and their practical human outcomes make them an institutional arm of preserving a socially, economically and politically marginalized underclass. People often use decreasing budgets as excuses not to implement comprehensive reform and workable strategies. They force austerity measures for the poor and working class: cuts in social programming, food and job access, in arts and creative development. But I counter that it takes more money, more tax dollars, not to do these.

In California I would remove the \$10 billion prison budget (it takes \$46,000 a year to house an adult; \$252,000 a year for a juvenile) and put this money into truly transformative practices, policies and actions. I would end projects like the high-speed rail from Los Angeles to San Francisco that will grow to \$220 billion when it's done (and only serve 200,000 mostly business commuters); I would better tax the \$38 billion generated in the state's ports, the largest commercial ports in the country. Today California is the only place on the planet that does not have a severance tax for companies who "sever" oil from the land. I would tax the oil companies and at the same time work on clean and renewable energy sources to end our dependence on oil.

I would make education and health care free and with the highest quality. I would make all arts, music, dance, theater and writing more accessible to all people. I would end poverty as well as create clean and green environments for all.

Why not? These are not only possible but also imperative.

The fact is it takes billions of dollars to keep people poor, disenfranchised and in prisons.

The very thing we fear is the very thing we're breeding.

Nationally I would end our war economy—over \$2 trillion in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past thirteen years, although our world is more insecure than ever. Instead I would establish a Peace and Healing Economy.

I submit—and many economists and scholars would agree—all of this is incompatible with the profit-based large-scale global capitalist economic/political matrix we live under. We need to imagine another way to go, then methodically and thoroughly go that way.

If people claim that what I'm proposing is bad for business, I'd argue that our high prison rate creates higher crime rates, and poverty creates more broken, unhealthy and unstable people. That's bad for business and everything else. It's good for business to have people with good health, strong jobs, education and growing families. Prosperity for all is best for business. Income inequality and deepening inequities are not.

Lastly, I'd like to speak to the importance of considering the diverse history and rich cultural make-up of the Latino community, where some specific issues, strategies and approaches (e.g., *La Cultura Cura*; traditional rites of passage; cultural traditions and the arts; spiritual healing; familial community supports) are being reintroduced to communities in order to improve the life chances of Latino males.

I've used healing circles, writing workshops, stories, poems, sweat lodge ceremonies and more in my work with the

most troubled youth, mostly Chicano/Central American, but also African American, Puerto Rican, Asian, European and Native American.

Through the Mosaic Multicultural Foundation of Seattle, run by renowned storyteller Michael Meade, I've helped mentor young men, many in gangs, as well as men from all walks of life and races, in conferences addressing issues of genius, mentoring, destiny, rage, addictions, violence and more. We've done Voices of Youth writing workshops with inner-city young people in L.A., Chicago, Seattle and other cities.

I've worked with and mentored organizations like B.U.I.L.D. in Chicago, Homeboy Industries in L.A., Spreading Seeds/Healing Network in L.A. County, Barrios Unidos in Santa Cruz and Hombres & Jóvenes Nobles, among others.

I've also used art, dance, theater, writing, music and such in poor working-class communities with the co-founding of Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore in the Northeast San Fernando Valley and our Young Warriors Project as well as Chicago's Youth Struggling for Survival and Guild Complex, among others. And I've done readings/talks and conferences over the past forty years in prisons, juvenile lockups, migrant camps, housing projects, homeless shelters, Native American Reservations, public and private schools, libraries, colleges and universities across the United States.

In addition, I've taken this work throughout Canada, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Japan—as well as such European cities as Paris, Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Heidelberg, Tuebingen, Isny, Salzburg, Amsterdam, Groningen, Rome, Milan, Manchester, London and Sarajevo (including to some of the worst prisons and slums).

For Chicanos/Mexicanos/Central Americans we've linked youth development and gang intervention with ancestral

roots and practices by deepening knowledge in the Mexika (so-called Aztec) and Mayan cosmologies, but also with tribal knowledge from the United States and other parts of the hemisphere.

I'm in agreement with *La Cultura Cura*—where culture, creativity and connection is utilized to balance, harmonize and make whole persons, families and communities previously wrought by the worst aspects of being uprooted, ignored, confused, addictive and raging.

For Latino males the answers are in our hands; the diversity of spiritual practices and lineages allow us to draw from Native, African, Asian and European traditions. The modern “war” against our youth and adult men has to end. We need to be the medicine for a wounded, fractured and unequal world. This means aligning our deepest wisdoms with the most advanced tools and the most cohesive and healthy communities.

Again: imagine this is possible. Then let's organize to make this happen by tapping into the inherent capabilities/regenerative capacity in human nature and in nature.