

Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable

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I started having conversations on this practice of “calling in” after attending Race Forward’s Facing Race Conference in Baltimore, MD in 2012. Facing Race was a gathering of thousands of people working on advancing racial justice. The space was full of energy, commitment, and a ride-or-die-and-put-it-all-on-the-line mentality for making sure we’ve got our bases covered in this fight against racism and dismantling white supremacy.

What happens when thousands of people who all “get it” come together and everyone knows something about “the work”? We lose all compassion for each other. All of it.

I witnessed all types of fucked up behavior and the culture that we have created to respond to said fucked up behavior.

Most of us know the drill. Someone says something that supports the oppression of another community, the red flags pop up and someone swoops in to call them out.

But what happens when that someone is a person we know — and love? What happens when we ourselves are *that* someone?

And what does it mean for our work to rely on how we have been programmed to punish people for their mistakes?

I’ll be the first person and the last person to say that anger is valid. Mistakes are mistakes; they deepen the wounds we carry. I know that for me when these mistakes are committed by people who I am in community with, it hurts even more. But these are people I care deeply about and want to see on the other side of the hurt, pain, and trauma: I am willing to offer compassion and patience as a way to build the road we are taking but have never seen before.

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I don’t propose practicing “calling in” in opposition to calling out. I don’t think that our work has room for binary thinking and action. However, I do think that it’s possible to have multiple tools, strategies, and methods existing simultaneously. It’s about being strategic, weighing the stakes and figuring out what we’re trying to build and how we are going to do it together.

So, what exactly is “calling in”? I’ve spent over a year of trying to figure this out for myself, and this practice is still coming to me daily. The first part of calling each other in is allowing mistakes to happen. Mistakes in communities seeking justice and freedom may not hurt any less but they also have possibility for transforming the ways we build with each other for a new, better world. We have got to believe that we can transform.

When confronted with another person’s mistake, I often think about what makes my relationship with this person important. Is it that we’ve done work together before? Is it that I know their politics? Is it that I *trust* their politics? Are they a family member? Oh shit, my mom? Is it that I’ve heard them talk about patience or accountability or justice before? Where is our common ground? And is our common ground strong enough to carry us through how we have enacted violence on each other?

I start “call in” conversations by identifying the behavior and defining why I am choosing to engage with them. I prioritize my values and invite them to think about theirs and where we share them. And then we talk about it. We talk about it together, like people who genuinely care about each other. We offer patience and compassion to each other and also keep it real, ending the conversation when we need to and know that it wasn’t a loss to give it a try.

Because when I see problematic behavior from someone who is connected to me, who is committed to some of the things I am, I want to believe that it’s possible for us to move through and beyond whatever mistake was committed.

I picture “calling in” as a practice of pulling folks back in who have strayed from us. It means extending to ourselves the reality that we will and do fuck up, we stray and there will always be a chance for us to return. Calling in as a practice of loving each other enough to allow each other to make mistakes; a

practice of loving ourselves enough to know that what we're trying to do here is a radical unlearning of everything we have been configured to believe is normal.

And yes, we have been configured to believe it's normal to punish each other and ourselves without a way to reconcile hurt. We support this belief by shutting each other out, partly through justified anger and often because some parts of us believe that we can do this without people who fuck up.

But, holy shit! We fuck up. All of us. I've called out and been called out plenty of times. I have gotten on people ruthlessly for supporting and sustaining oppression and refusing to listen to me. People have gotten on me about speaking to oppressions that aren't mine, being superficial about inclusion, and throwing in communities I'm not a part of as buzzwords. But when we shut each other out we make clubs of people who are right and clubs of people who are wrong as if we are not more complex than that, as if we are all-knowing, as if we are perfect. But in reality, we are just really scared. Scared that we will be next to make a mistake. So we resort to pushing people out to distract ourselves from the inevitability that we will cause someone hurt.

And it is seriously draining. It is seriously heartbreaking. How we are treating each other is preventing us from actually creating what we need for ourselves. We are destroying each other. We need to do better for each other.

We have to let go of treating each other like not knowing, making mistakes, and saying the wrong thing make it impossible for us to ever do the right things.

And we have to remind ourselves that we once didn't know. There are infinitely many more things we have yet to know and may never know.

We have to let go of a politic of disposability. We are what we've got. No one can be left to their fuck ups and the shame that comes with them because ultimately we'll be leaving ourselves behind.

I want us to use love, compassion, and patience as tools for critical dialogue, fearless visioning, and transformation. I want us to use shared values and visions as proactive measures for securing our future freedom. I want us to be present and alive to see each other change in all of the intimate ways that we experience and enact violence.

I want our movements sustainable, angry, gentle, critical, loving — kicking ass and calling each other back in when we stray.

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