



Integral We-Spaces for Racial Equity: Loving Fiercely Across Our Differences

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INTRODUCTION: THE NEED IS GREAT

As we put the finishing touches on this chapter in January 2021, we do so amidst grave violence and polarization in the United States, where

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three of us live, reinforcing the dire need for break-through ideas and practices to address racism and white supremacy. We are lost in a world we have never seen before heading toward a future that defies prediction. This moment calls us to step into our fullest humanity, which means bringing from the shadows our hidden biases, blind spots, and heartbreak. As change agents in our various professional roles, we have considerable frustration at the slow pace of societal change that has brought us to this pivotal historical moment. We ask ourselves why various policies like affirmative action and the diversity and inclusion efforts of organization development practitioners over the past 40 years have not borne more fruit. Why are we so polarized and unable to bridge across our differences in ways that produce significant transformation and realignment of power relations in our society? What have we been missing about our current state that has kept us from making more progress toward true racial equity? Why have we not yet realized our shared values and dreams of co-creating “beloved” multicultural communities?

In these times of unprecedented unrest and distress—from the global pandemic, to greater awareness of racial injustice, to increased polarization in societies around the world, to the accelerating climate crisis, to white supremacists storming the US Capital—our work as group facilitators and social justice educators is to provide solace, help make meaning, join in true partnership with a world that is suffering because of our difficulty daring to connect across our most pernicious group differences. The need is great. Many people are expressing readiness to join across racial, generational, ethnic, gender, religious, and class differences to counter inequitable power relations and structures and to heal divisiveness and suffering. Yet often the question that comes up is, “how”?

In answering that question, we explore the theory and practice of our emerging model for creating the conditions and spaces needed for deep engagement across difference, engagement that can lead to transformation in our understandings of our social identities, and to emergent practices for deconstructing white supremacy and patriarchy and “creating a world in which it is easier to love” (Freire, 1970). We see our model, *We-Spaces for Equity*, as a potentially valuable map to such a new world. But the map is not the territory, so we recognize the limitations of our thinking and practice and yet boldly step into the space we see as having potential for fostering greater capacity to engage meaningfully and intentionally across our differences. We explore how the application of the Integral AQAL Theory to this work can lead to individual, group,

and structural transformation to foster a more just and equitable world. In describing *Why We Matters*, Terry Patten (2016) points to the potential of such an approach.

Our global crisis-opportunity is generating a context of urgency, capacity and potential that is fertile ground to sprout the seeds of radical transformation being sown in our We-Spaces. Perhaps our shared experience can interweave diversity that liberates our evolutionary urge to converge, and the intuitive system energy to pull it off ... We have only to do a good job of learning better ways of being us together, while intending innovations that turn evolutionary corners into emergent new territory. (p. 243).

As gestalt practitioners and designers of group learning events, we are humbly experimenting with ways for racially diverse groups of people to come together to move beyond predictable conflicts and typical ways of relating. Building upon the pioneering work of Otto Scharmer in his U-Lab methodology (2007), we are developing a design for diverse groups to address their hidden biases and barriers to full inclusion. In the convenings that we have called “Dare to Connect WE-Labs,” we guide groups to build community and then push into the more difficult conversations possible in We-Spaces for Equity.

In describing our approach, we are challenged to find words and specific examples to give the reader a window into the ineffable. Words and concepts can only point the way toward lived experience. We invite you to suspend skepticism and bring radical imagination and embodied reading, allowing for the imaginal possibilities of We-Space. What if? If only? Perhaps it’s possible to make contact across differences beyond current or past efforts.

Before we describe the scholarly and theoretical foundation of our practice, we want to offer an example from one of our sessions that demonstrates the generative possibilities of engaging proactively in collective learning that acknowledges our individual uniqueness but that is more focused on our intergroup relating. We convened one of our workshops in October 2019 at the famous Ghost Ranch conference center in New Mexico. People came from across the United States and from other countries to participate in the session. The largest demographic of the group was White women. At one point, one of our facilitators of color challenged them to move beyond the defensive moves of white fragility. One of the participants later reflected on this moment, remembering:

the invocation voiced by Placida in the spiral, “I need my White sisters to stand with me in their fierceness, not crumble from their shame.” When she said this, something inside me shifted. I arrived. ...

This call to action resonated throughout the session where the White group met and struggled with how to more fully show up as allies to People of Color, both during the workshop and in their professional roles when they returned home. They encouraged each other to find their power and their voices and were able to push themselves and our group as a result. Following the workshop, the group self-organized and continued a self-directed year-long practice of reading, small group activities, and holding each other accountable for becoming more anti-racist allies. What began as a cross group conversation morphed into transformative change and development for many of these white women. This work continues beyond the life of the Ghost Ranch workshop and demonstrates the power of activating people to claim their identities and find their courage to grow and continuously lean into the deeper questions and issues. Little did they know that 2020 would become a crucible for national reckoning with race.

This project brings together four streams of transformative theory and practice with our work on transformative learning through group work and dialogue (Gallegos, 2014; Schapiro et al., 2012; Wasserman & Gallegos, 2009). These streams include gestalt group work (Nevins, 2014), social identity development (Quinones-Rosada, 2010; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012), and integral theory, including the AQAL model (Esbjorn-Hargens, 2010; Wilber, 2000) and the notion of We-Space (Gunnlaugsen & Brabant, 2016). An integration of these approaches to DEI work and to personal growth through group experience is necessary because used in isolation they often lead to either an accentuating of our individuality at the expense of our group identities, or to an essentialism of group identities that ignores both our common humanity and our individual differences.

We bring these streams together to create transformative learning experiences through which the body, mind, heart and, senses can tap into the widest and deepest imaginal possibilities to generate break-through ideas and practices for disrupting and evolving beyond our white and male supremacist culture, systems, and structures. In this “brave space” (Arao & Clemens, 2013), people are invited to embrace and maximize their differences and to connect with curiosity, courage, and love. We

add to the integral conception of We-Space an emphasis on our social group identities. Such spaces are expansive enough to hold our differences and yet enable us to be our fullest autonomous selves within a collective and coherent whole. In our WE-Lab workshops, we value and encourage respectful conflict, engagement, dialogue, and radical honesty (Brown, 2017).

In our work, we draw on our diverse identities as a Chicana (Placida), an Afro-Caribbean man (Akasha), a white Jewish man (Steve), and a white Jewish woman (Carol) as we develop and model our own We-Space and capacity to love fiercely across our own differences. Seeing our differences as critical and valued resources rather than insignificant or problematic aspects of our relating, we strive to practice what we invite our participants to practice, elevating our differences by engaging in constructive conflict and creating brave space among us where we can be our fullest, individual selves while simultaneously elevating our collective intentions and connections. We dare to connect across our racial, ethnic, class, gender, religious, and individual differences and help our participants lean in courageously to theirs. Meaningful and inclusive collaboration requires effort, attention, and time. In our preparation for delivering workshops and processing during sessions, we practice deep listening and dialogue, which often challenges us to change.

For example, during our first five day workshop, we found ourselves, after an unsatisfying opening evening, struggling with what to do. Working long into the night, Akasha challenged us to rework our design, feeling that our BiPOC participants had been less visible and engaged during that opening session. While Steve was reluctant to let go of our plan and Carol encouraged us to stay open, we decided to center the leadership and perspectives of Akasha and Placida, who took the lead in moving us to a more emergent space, contrary to the norms of dominant white supremacist culture. We had to step away from habitual centering of whiteness in order to create a We-Space for us, and our participants, where all were on equal footing. We modified our design and were intentional about elevating, supporting, and centering the voices and experiences of People of Color while challenging the White people to stay engaged and contribute from a less dominant stance, with deeper empathy for those in marginalized identities. This led to powerful learning for both groups. Our parallel process of working on ourselves as designers while the group accelerated their capacity to engage with each other created a rich field experiment in resonance and collective learning.

OUR THEORIES OF CHANGE

Group Work and Dialogue: Transformative Learning in Relationship

The chapter titled “Group work and dialogue: Spaces and processes for transformative learning in relationship” (Schapiro et al., 2012) differentiates between three sometimes overlapping approaches to transformative group work, defined by their focus of change: individual growth and self-awareness; relational empathy across our group identities (e.g., race and gender); and critical systemic consciousness through awareness of systems of power and privilege. While differentiated in theory, in practice these approaches often overlap. Picturing a Venn diagram with three circles, the point at which the three circles/approaches overlap, is “the place where the most integrated and transformational experiences can occur ... it is at that nexus—where our individual, group, and systemic levels of consciousness come together—that we have the opportunity to change in the most profound ways” (p. 368). In what follows, we explore how to work in that “sweet spot” through the application of other theories and practices that can help to make that integration and deep transformation possible.

Gestalt Group Work and the Paradoxical Theory of Change

A key principle we draw upon is the paradoxical theory of change, a central tenet of gestalt theory, which holds that in order to move toward a different future state, we thoroughly ground ourselves in the current state. In other words, in order to move into the future in a more fully integrated way, we begin with the present and fully immerse ourselves in what is true for us right now. As first articulated by Beiser (1970):

change occurs when one becomes what he [sic] is, not when he tries to become what he is not. ... change can occur when the patient abandons, at least for the moment, what he would like to become and attempts to be what he is. (p. 77)

In regard to racial justice work, this means that we must accept our implicitly racist biases, assumptions, and practices if we are to be able to move beyond them, including, for People of Color, our internalized racism. We must embrace our collective shadow as a society, uncovering

cultural bias, distortions, rigidity, traumas, numbness, and “the pernicious stuff lodged within the thought systems and body that hampers the process of connections” (Murray, 2016, p. 209). Our belief is that when shadow is freed up, we see new connections more clearly. At the collective level, “shadow is what is not talked about, represented or enacted. Therefore, to heal the shadow is to speak a truth not previously consciously known to self and the rest of the group” (p. 210).

One example of recovering these collective shadows during our workshops comes when we ask people to bring forward some of their “ancestors” into the training space. We invite them to identify a person from their past from whom they draw inspiration. It was remarkable for people to both appreciate the lessons learned from their forbears while recognizing the racism and historical trauma experienced by and perpetrated by them. This is the shadow work of racism—the recognition that we were all given racist messages that have reinforced white dominance and the oppression of marginalized people. Our challenge is to appreciate that our ancestors did the best they could and that we inherited unconscious biases as a result. Purging ourselves of these requires active exploration and excavation of these messages, loving our ancestors fiercely and yet letting go of the racist baggage most of us received from them. Bringing these dynamics into the present and squarely facing them provides us with new energy in the moment to engage in new ways with people from other backgrounds.

This way of being allows us to work with the present reality, trusting that the path forward will emerge as we stay open to the here and now, which is another key principle that we draw from gestalt group work (Huckabay, 2014; Kepner, 2008). As Kepner explains:

Gestalt group process ... is an attempt to create conditions for learning about what it means to be a member of a group ... so that the polarities and dilemmas of separateness and unity can be experienced ... Within the boundaries of that social system, phenomenological processes are occurring simultaneously on all three system levels: the intrapersonal level, the interpersonal level and the systems level ... which affects the way people in that system feel about themselves and each other, as well as the way they behave in that environment. (p. 3)

Utilizing the paradoxical theory of change, we invite a deeper awareness of the collective dynamics that keep us locked in intractable “wicked

problems” (Camillus, 2008) of racism, white supremacy and structural inequities. In our work with diverse groups, we focus on what it means to be a member of an ethnoracial identity group (e.g., Black, Latinx, White, and Multi-racial), as manifest and experienced in the larger group (Gallegos & Ferdman, 2012). This requires that we acknowledge both our separateness and unity and the systems level implications of our racialized ways of being. In our workshops, we intentionally build brave containers where people can feel seen and acknowledged in their unique individuality while also accepting their membership in groups that have unequal power relations historically established to maintain patterns of domination and subordination. In the section that follows, we expand on this notion of how we understand our social identities.

Social Identity Development

Social identity refers to how one identifies with specific categories and groups to which one is assigned based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. As Quinones-Rosada (2010) puts it, these are “group identities based on differences that make a difference, on characteristics and on circumstances that are shared by groups of people ... based on ... realities that psychologically and materially matter in people’s lives” (p. 4).

Social identity development refers to the ways in which one’s identity regarding each of these group categories can develop over time as one becomes increasingly aware of their social construction, one’s relationship to the power dynamics involved, and one’s potential choices as to how one relates to this identity; for instance, what it means to be Black, White, or Latinx. Social identity development theory was initially articulated by Hardiman and Jackson (1997) and is used as one of the key conceptual frameworks in the approach to social justice education developed by them and their colleagues (Adams et al., 2007), an approach that we draw on in our work.

The model describes stages that people potentially go through as they become disembedded from their socialized identities and become more intentional as to how they relate to these identities. From a Mezirowian perspective (1991, 2000), these stage changes come about through a process of disorientation, reflection, and action as our present perspectives and frames of reference about, for example, our racial identity, no longer satisfactorily explain our experience, and we develop new ways of

making meaning—and of thinking, being, and acting—in response. From a constructive-developmental and integral perspective, social identity is one of the lines of development that people may experience as various aspects of themselves that they are subject to become “objects” that they can reflect on and potentially change (Kegan, 1982); that is, ideas or ways of thinking that we have and that do not have us, and that we can therefore change. One must, for instance, accept one’s identity as White before one can resist the socially dominant definition of whiteness and move to redefine it and practice authentic rather than performative allyship. In keeping with the paradoxical theory of change, one cannot become anti-racist without first understanding how one is being racist and supporting racist systems.

Integral AQAL and We-Space

We have found that the Integral AQAL and We-Space concepts provide useful frames for how to integrate and bring to a deeper level the group work and development perspectives on racial justice and equity described above. By bringing together DEI work with these integral perspectives, we believe that we are creating a way of working that transcends the limits of each on their own, infusing a deeper level of collective wisdom to the DEI work, while overcoming what has been a tendency toward spiritual bypassing (Masters, 2010) in the integral work; that is, a tendency to claim a collective form of consciousness that leaves behind the richness of our diversity, and obscures the differentials in power and privilege that remain under the surface. We question whether there can be such an authentic transcendence absent the willingness to acknowledge and address racism, bias and structural oppression that is baked into all our institutions and systems. Rather than avoiding or ignoring these, our work is an attempt to directly engage and shift these destructive patterns, opening the way for truly meaningful and “fierce love” across difference and fostering humanizing, heartfelt spaces that take into account structural and systemic oppression (Welch et al., 2020). As Quinones-Rosada (2010) argues, social identity development and awareness of racial injustice do not come automatically with higher forms of psychological development. While people at such stages have the capacity to disembody themselves from the socialized mind (Kegan, 1982) and unconscious white supremacist ways of thinking and being, such development does not

happen without intentional focus and learning. Our work with groups is designed to bring such a focus (Fig. 23.1).

Our We-Spaces for Equity model is adapted from Ken Wilber’s Integral AQAL theory. AQAL is an acronym for “all quadrants, all lines, all levels.” Integral Theory describes four perspectives—subjective (inside), objective (outside), intersubjective (collective), and interobjective (systems)—that are used to understand any issue or aspect of reality. These perspectives also represent dimensions of identity—“I” (Upper Left/UL), “we” (Lower Left/LL), “it” (Upper Right/UR), and “its” (Lower Right/LR). Individuals have subjective or interior experiences as well as observable behaviors and characteristics, or exteriors. Additionally, and critical to our conceptualization of We-Space, individuals are members of groups, including social identity groups with interior or intersubjective cultural elements and exterior social systems, as described above. One of the uses of Integral Theory and its AQAL model is to present a form of

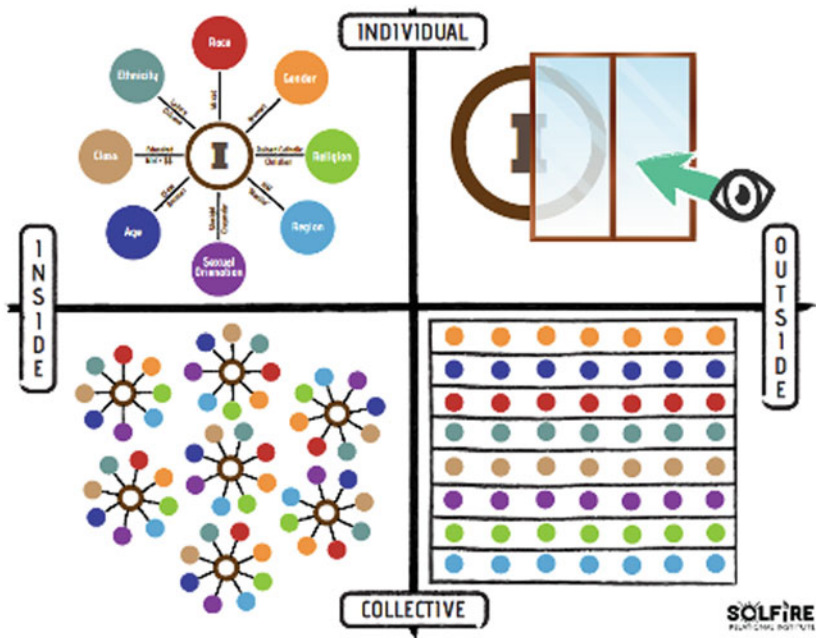


Fig. 23.1 Integral we-spaces for racial equity (SOLFIRE Relational Institute)

harmonization and integration of various perspectives. It is with this traditional application in mind that we have adopted and adapted AQAL for facilitating our We-Labs. Our work focuses on people's experiences in the lower left, or WE quadrant, informed by the other three perspectives. We are excited about the untapped potential of this quadrant including deeper consideration of racial subgroups and how they are deeply impacted by systemic racism.

In using and adapting the concept and practice of We-Space, we build upon the considerable body of work that has been developed in the integral community over the course of the last twenty years (Gunnlaugsen & Brabant, 2016) as a way of understanding and explaining what is possible as we develop and work with the collective wisdom that can be found in working in that WE or lower left quadrant. Patten (2018), in his book, *A New Republic of the Heart*, describes We-Space as:

a relatively new term, used in the integral evolutionary community to describe an emerging set of practices to catalyze an intersubjective awakening of a higher order intelligence, in which 'we is smarter than me'. This is an inherent dimension of our being, as old as evolution, and vast in size and scope. It includes all human culture, especially what is implicit rather than explicit—in other words, everything that 'we all just know'. (p. 265)

He goes on to describe the powerful "shift from me to we" as

a move into a level of experience in which we are not radically separate. This collective phenomenon mirrors the integral shift from thinking 'from the parts to the whole' to thinking 'from the whole to the parts and back again'. This is a new social orientation, particularly for postmodern Westerners who take great pride in their individuality. (p. 273)

In describing various practices that aim to develop and use We-Space, Patten also points out what he sees as the yet-unrealized potential to use these spaces to not only develop collective consciousness within our own groups of like-minded people from shared social and cultural identities, but also to communicate deeply across those divides.

Other frontiers involve our racial and ethnic ... divides, and we will continue to learn to engage ethnic identity issues more frankly and fruitfully. It is crucial to learn to conduct generative conversations that cross

boundaries of race ..., conversations in which not only are all participants heard, but all learn and change and hear one another. (p. 268)

This is the frontier and missing piece in Integral and DEI practices that our work addresses. The overemphasis in Western culture on individualism and individual autonomy blinds theorists, practitioners, and participants from seeing more of what may be available in the lower left quadrant where *We-Spaces* reside. We wonder what might be possible if we could suspend our obsessive attachment to individuality and excessive rationality to feel our way into another way of connecting. What could we discover in our interactions if we learned to listen differently, to hold our histories differently, to amplify our sub-group identities, and really see their powerful, ubiquitous shaping influences on us? What kinds of skills, capacities, and practices do we need to thrive in the foreign territory of collective contact available in *We-Spaces for Equity*? These are the questions that we are living our way into as we work with groups to make radical contact, as we describe in more detail below.

WE-SPACES FOR EQUITY: CONNECTING AQAL AND DEI

Guiding assumptions that inform our work with groups include our belief that human beings strive to make meaning of the world and their place in it. In this way, we come to know ourselves more as we engage with other individuals and groups. We also believe that too little time and attention has been given to functional ways to engage across group differences. While many maintain that emphasizing differences only leads to conflict and hard feelings, we believe instead that under supportive conditions, differences are a source of deeper connection, learning, and innovation. Our bias is that when we maximize collective space, people learn a deeper practice to stay in *We-Space* and are able to focus intentionally on what is emerging from the collective. When we practice *We-Spaces for Equity*, we acknowledge and hold sacred the dignity of individuals and subgroups as part of a collective that loves publicly and fiercely across differences and moves toward greater connections that include rather than avoiding difficult conversations about racism, sexism, white supremacy, and power. These can be thought of as the sub-we's within the larger WE of the lower left quadrant; in other words, the subcultures that we are all members of interacting and maintaining contact at the collective rather than individual level.

Deriving from our developmental theory and practice about how adults learn and grow, and the streams of transformative theory and practice described above, we utilize a combination of modalities including experiential, contemplative and somatic presencing, time in nature, intentional relationship building, racially homogenous subgroups, intentional dialogue across groups, just in time conceptual frameworks, frequent practice opportunities with enough scaffolding to support experimentation, and brave enough space to make mistakes. We see the flow of the group's time together as building sequentially from simpler and more interpersonal connections in the early period to gradually accelerating levels of complexity in our interactions and topics, basically introducing the group to itself in each of the quadrants: as individuals, interpersonally, through intentional intergroup contact and collective experience. Our intention throughout is to build a container safe enough to support growth while still uncomfortable enough to help people stretch into new and untested behaviors and ways of relating. Mezirow's (1991) concept of "disorienting dilemmas" fits well with the context of this work as we intentionally create opportunities to disembed from current ways of knowing about ourselves, others, and our group memberships. The resulting disorientation, when well-supported, allows a fundamental reorienting toward more expansive ways of knowing self and other. As one of our participants thoughtfully reflected:

I left the group awakened and exhausted, full and emptied out, connected and deeply craving solitude—a personal and collective alchemy of contradictions. The honest truth is that I know something powerful happened to me, I'm just still figuring out exactly what it was ...

We also believe that building community is a critical prerequisite for deep and collective learning to occur. Rather than assuming one size fits all, we spend considerable time in the early life of the group setting ground rules, testing assumptions and introducing the group to itself along multiple dimensions, learning more about what individuals are bringing to the community. Our workshops, which have ranged from in-person retreats to multiple sessions in virtual spaces, are designed to intentionally take participants on a journey that builds from preliminary foundational contact into more challenging levels of knowing and being known, from simplicity of individuality toward complexity of intergroup and systemic awareness and experience.

As mentioned earlier, one of the early processes often includes making intimate contact with ancestors. This fundamental practice has proved to be important in grounding participants in the historical antecedents of our identities and experiences. Often bittersweet stories are shared and include examples of when we had been both victimized and perpetrators of victimization. We engage in the powerful invitation to bring those ancestors to the collective along with the request for direct messages from them to us as a community. Their offerings are often profound, personal, and yet deeply relevant to what we are challenged by today in our lives. Collectively, the group is able to experience our shared humanity while also attending to the vast diversity of regions, cultures, and personal experiences present in the group.

We-Lab

In our sessions during the WE-Lab, we intentionally support individuals to recognize and take in the implications of their group memberships, unchosen and socially constructed, yet powerfully determinant of our experiences, opportunities, joys, and heartbreak as human beings. Rather than pretending to be color blind or evolved beyond these differences, we intentionally amplify our awareness of our diversity, but do so in a loving community of mutuality and attention to power relations. Our notion is that once we become more aware of the impact of these powerful dynamics on our day-to-day experiences and actions, the greater chance we can disembody ourselves from systems of oppression and use ourselves as change agents and allies in even more impactful ways.

We-Space Dialogue Sessions

In addition to the content and process pieces of our design, we incorporate explicit We-Space community time in each session where the group is able to practice being in collective awareness, as a particular discipline and practice. Each of these periods focuses on different aspects of what the group is learning about itself but largely is unstructured allowing the collective voice of the whole to emerge. Our experiences parallel what Brabant and Diperna (2016) describe as:

a deepening awareness and sensitivity to time, place, and culture. One can maintain contact with the local ‘we’ while simultaneously expanding the

horizon of awareness to larger and larger fields i.e. practitioners demonstrating this stage of we-intelligence gain the capacity to feel into the way that larger social issues such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation are influencing and shaping both individual perspectives as well as the overall group field itself. (p. 22)

Stretching the limits of past ways of relating across differences is sometimes profoundly disorienting and yet in the context of a supportive learning community, people are able to hold each other lovingly and, at times, critically. One participant was able to describe her fundamental transformation that allowed her to see her White identity in the context of larger systems at play and yet maintain contact with others who did not share that identity:

I walked away with an embodied sense of how deeply people want to love and be loved across differences and to be part of a ‘we’ rather than ‘me’ and ‘us vs. them’. I was moved by the power of that desire, built stronger from acts of sharing of love through our stories and affirming interactions with each other, to hold individuals and groups through hard conversations about white supremacy. I found capacity and language within myself to bring love more explicitly into anti-racism work moving forward.

In We-Space, we connect AQAL with DEI to look at our individual awareness as a person with social identities in the Upper Left of the AQAL. Using these identities, we help ourselves and others build awareness around the behaviors that reinforce a culture of dominance, such as white supremacy, classism, and various forms of oppression. What we are offering is a way to build capacity to access and deal with social identity issues at the group and systemic levels. We operate on the assumption that there is more in the collective space that we are not fully tapping into. Our We-Space approach is not just about a collection of individuals who contribute to the We. Each individual brings their social identities. We cannot have a full We-Space if we do not deal with the multiple We’s within the larger We.

CONCLUSION

Our intention in this chapter has been to invite other scholar-practitioners into this grand experiment we have been conducting. Our We-Space practice builds on the good work of others but takes that work even further

in service of these perilous times we find ourselves in as a society. Our call to action is for bold experimentation and humility at the same time. We are not claiming to have found the magic solution to these issues but we are also clearly tapping unto an underdeveloped resource. We are calling for deep collaboration and connectivity across our racial differences in a way that does not harmonize to maintain superficial contact but instead brings the full force and power of our differences together to strengthen, deepen, and make more authentic relating possible. Do you hear the call and are you willing to truly “dare to connect?”

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