

Organizing Social Spaces as if Social Relations Matter

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The Four Rs

Throughout the history of resistance, rebellion, and revolution—the three Rs that should be taught alongside the traditional ones of reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic—there has always been a fourth R, consciously or not: reorganization. Such reorganization has sought to establish not simply new social structures but also, critically, new social relations.

That has not always ended well. In fact, it has frequently ended badly, with different forms of social organization, to be sure, but ones that ultimately—or too quickly—entailed new forms of domination and terror. If we humans have learned anything from these moments, it’s that the reconstitution of people up to the challenge of enacting goodness in the good society that they are trying to create takes time and practice. Moreover, the time and practices needed far exceed the duration and acts of toppling a king, despot, or dictator, overthrowing colonial, military, or statist rule, or overcoming internecine struggles among radicals.

Various “horizontal” or “from below” experiments, as they’ve been called, have struggled openly during the past two decades in particular with this problematic. They’ve humbly aspired to focus on the social relations side of the puzzle versus—and also within—those exhilarating, necessary instances of popular uprisings.

Some appear to have done it better than others, such as the Zapatistas (recently celebrating twenty years since their first public entrance on the world stage) and Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement (which became a national movement thirty years ago), at least according to the stories told by some of those born into these autonomous communities, and thus who’ve never known another world and have been socialized by other ways of attempting to live together.

Most of the shorter-lived recent occupations of squares, plazas, and parks, too, quickly set about this task, reveling—at least initially—in the transformed ways people began relating to each other within the myriad of self-organized structures intended to meet everyone’s needs as well as desires.

The same could easily be said of the power of contemporary social movements such as the massive, relatively long-lasting student strike in Quebec in 2012. In that case, months of blockades and nightly illegal street demonstrations, coupled with a plethora of assemblies and collective culture-making, wove a magical fabric of hitherto-unimaginable social interactions across generations and at least two languages.

Here in the United States, the Occupy uprising, in its heady beginnings, created spaces where social-media-isolated people could suddenly “find each other” and (re)discover human(e) connections (see, relatedly, my essay “Occupy Anarchism,” <http://cbmilstein.wordpress.com/2014/03/15/occupy-anarchism-musings-on-prehistories-present-imperfects-future-imperfects/>). But also here in the United States, where looking through the lens of “I” first and then “we” down the road is so deeply ingrained in us, it too quickly became clear that the ties that bound us Occupiers were spider-web fragile. We torn each other apart in so many varied ways, along so many lines of hurt already scribed into our bodies by white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, ableism, settler colonialism, classism, overdetermined identity politics, and a long lineage of other violences.

The conundrum of remaking ourselves as we attempt to remake society appears to stymie us here so much faster than in places with greater vestiges of communal lifeways.

It also erects an extra-high hurdle for US social struggles and movements: Can we rise above the learned behaviors inculcated by the mythical origin story and its related American dream

of the lone individual making it against all odds, pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, as entrepreneurial pioneer? Can we surmount the way we tend to instrumentalize each other, “valuing” other people as mere things in relation to our cost-benefit analysis and accountability ledger sheet of strategic organizing and movement needs—relations that have been naturalized in us, made subtle and almost invisible, by capitalism? Can we avoid brushing off the ways that we lack empathy for each other, as ourselves “products” of this damaging society too, with uncompassionate phrases such as “We need to focus on the real enemy”?

It’s too easy to blame the police or state repression alone for why our projects, much less movements, fail. They fail us, and we fail them.

We’ll always fail in ways, of course. But if we don’t allow others—and ourselves—to make mistakes; if we see mishaps as aberrations or, worse, a condemnation of the whole of someone’s being; if we believe that failure and success are separate, stable moments; and if we think that being human, being imperfect, is in itself wrong, then we’ve already lost. We’re already lost.

There are many forces that can be blamed for making most of us, and indeed most of humanity, feel lost at this time in history, from the new layers of alienation heaped on us by high-tech innovations to the palpable sense of “no future” that military-industrial ecological devastation instills. This list, like all the painful -isms, unfurls too far. We don’t just feel lost, though. More to the point, we are tangibly experiencing much loss, and at faster and faster rates, ranging from communities to climates, from homes to loved ones.

This is all the more reason that it’s imperative to rediscover each other, yet in the fullness and complexity of our imperfections, and recognize that such imperfection will be inherent in the revolutionary transformation of present-day society—made up not merely of hierarchical institutions and systemic exploitation but also damaged social relations. It is, then, our perspective on failure that matters.

To conjure up the insight of a teacher-artist friend, Arthur, during a history-oriented study group recently, the point of revolutions is not to achieve some permanently perfect world, or a utopia in the most caricatured of definitions. It is to find ourselves having different, less horrendous conflicts—say, why the delegation of tasks related to community health care isn’t working in an autonomous, directly democratic region as opposed to when and where to go to war as a nation-state. It is to be better equipped to walk toward and through those conflicts in increasingly egalitarian, compassionate ways.

In short, it’s about making better mistakes, and utilizing our better failures as moments of transformation in pursuit of an ever-freer society, filled with ever more dignity and freedom, among other lovely practices.

Another teacher-artist friend, Carla, observed that her goal is, in fact, to have projects fail. That is, she remains open to the likelihood of failure and hence how we might do that well. Her clear-eyed notion grasps the generative attributes of missing the intended mark. Carla’s failures-in-action are amazing to behold, drawing out the best in people, for themselves and toward others. She creates spaces of collaborative empowerment with others, without knowing what will emerge, and strives to curate various contexts in which people can discover the potential of those spaces and themselves together.

Sitting with Comfortable Discomfort

Such experiments-in-failure mean that we continually take risks, seeking a palpable sense of security by not always playing it safe. They also mean, at one and the same time, that we continually take steps to make ourselves and each other feel safer in this world, whether by trying harder “not to be a jerk” in those many situations where we can avoid it, to dealing with “shit” in our lives when it happens with poise and composure—say, from an instance of a single hurtful behavior or misunderstanding, to news that someone you know is suddenly facing a long-term serious illness and likely needs a lot of extra support.

Sitting like a good friend with the not-knowingness of such experimentation means recognizing that when we feel discomfort, perhaps that’s a helpful indicator that we’re comfortably on to something. Such uncomfatableness—as in being constructively nudged to explore the edges of one’s knowledge and worldview, experience and habits—entails trying out practices that reach toward the ethics we value, even if we trip and fall a lot. It looks like the transparent trial and error of constituting the types of projects and communities that we think we wish to be embedded within, with intentionality, alongside people who are continually eager to self-reflect, and with similar intentionality, and be just as open to constantly tinkering with and even ending such experiments well. It is about not tying one’s identity to the “success” at all costs of a project or outcome, especially our personal vision of what that success will consist of.

Constructive discomfort, or the commitment to always grow, necessitates empathetic, dialogic honesty, both individually and in unison. Such dedication to dynamism holds out the educative sustenance of co-mentorship, mutual inspiration, and care along with a closeness hammered out in the process of getting through the hard things in life with others. And it involves a whole bunch of other good stuff that we can barely imagine until we test it out, gladly comfortable with the understanding that we’ll unearth, probably unwittingly, that good stuff by making lots of mistakes and a few miraculous discoveries simultaneously.

Our experiments-in-imperfection might be seen, in essence, as embracing comfortable discomfort, backed up by the collective promise—figuratively, a mutual embrace versus a contractual handshake or legalistic guarantee—that we’ll strive to solidify trust in each other on the always-uneven, nonlinear path of aspiring toward personal and social goodness.

If we’re failing well, we will stretch ourselves past all those numerous, subtle socialized behaviors that seem to thwart the best of our intentions and rhetoric, perhaps allowing for inklings of how to better shape better worlds. We’ll have plenty of lightbulb moments as well, illuminating ways forward that also nourish us now. And if we’re lucky, the connectivity we’re so longing for—self-love and social love coupled with love’s intimacies—will make its presence deeply, solidly felt. Everyone won’t be equally enamored with each other; but maybe we’ll be able to be neighborly toward all. We’ll remember what it means to be human again, in relation to others who are human too.

This is all well and good in words. But what does it look like in the hardscrabble of practice? What is it that allows this to begin to happen? What creates the ground for bonding and building? For knowing, with far less doubt than at present, that there are others in this world who will have your back, especially through the longest, darkest of days?

In the grand gestures of the first hours and days of uprisings, our social relations are wholly destabilized, fairy-tale refreshed, as if we’ve known each other for the whole of our lives in the deepest of ways. Part of the great sorrow when such rebellious spaces collapse is the near-

overnight, near-incomprehensible loss of those ties—strings, now broken, to a dreamworld of our own making. We stumble around afterward, going numbly from project to project, person to person, or hiding away with our depression, mystified by why we can't re-create that space with a snap of our fingers. We gripe about all the reasons it didn't stick, exonerating ourselves and how we treated each other. Or we might retreat to "safe spaces" where we think we'll never get hurt or have to suffer, and understandable as that impulse is (and sometimes critical for a mourning period), we miss out on the experience of life itself, which from birth to death is an intricate blend of beginnings and endings, disappointments and joys.

Social relations alone aren't sufficient to allow ephemeral commons to become more enduring ones, maturing into caring communities that can hold us for the entirety of the human experience. At the same time, they are absolutely necessary, and most often not taken seriously in all the micro-moments that make up our lives.

Yet what if we continually organized our social spaces as if social relations matter? What if we dedicated ourselves to being enthusiastic lifelong learners and thus better schooled for revolutionary openings, to better be those people who just might be able to supply the staying power for a better society—one where we and our communities are always, also, becoming better?

I want to share a story about Gandhi that I heard recently during a socially tinged guided meditation about how one might apply this to large-scale political resistance. I can't vouch for the truthfulness of the narrative, yet its charm is appealing whether as fact or fiction. And even if fiction, it's a marvelous imaginary that might jog us to contemplate how we can be mindful of practicing something similar in our contemporary colonized spaces.

As the story was relayed to me, on Gandhi's long salt march to the sea to protest colonialism, he journeyed from village to village to gather more people. But he viewed all the stopovers not as means to an end; they were part and parcel of the process of decolonization, writ large. In one village, Gandhi found seven or eight thousand residents waiting for him in a big square, ready to hear his words, yet as usual, none of the "untouchables" in this community were allowed to join the public gathering. Gandhi sat in silence for some five or six hours, until the villagers relented and let the outcasts sit among them, per Gandhi's urging, to also listen. Gandhi then explained that colonialism isn't merely the British lording over India but also Indians lording over each other, and that all such social relations had to be dismantled to truly eradicate colonial relations.

It's the not-so-grand in-between times, the bulk of our time—what we perceive as the stopovers—that might actually be key in the long haul. So let's bring a microscope into this picture, looking closely at how one might curate the potentiality for qualitative social relations in tender opposition to the quantitative, hollow social relations that we generally are compelled to just barely exist within.

In previous written pieces, I've zoomed in, both from the distance of solidarity and—closer still—at the level of observer-participant, to scrutinize how people can be fully cognizant of "organizing as if social relations matter" within ongoing campaigns and social movements. What has set these cases apart is that the participants themselves see the cultivation of social relations as inherently tied to the cultivation of a new society, or winning prefigurative gains in the present. The participants not only recognize the significance of this, however; they act on it.

If you'd like to take a look through the lens of this type of organizing at how folks have attempted to nurture new social relations, I'd urge you to read my blog post on a day in the life of the Free Education for All struggle that was waged for well over a year by Cooper Union students, potential students, alumni, faculty, staff, and others in Manhattan: <http://cbmilstein.wordpress.com/>

2013/02/21/organizing-as-if-social-relations-matter/. Or better still, drop into an afternoon in the luxurious flow of the six-month-long Quebec student strike, via the Mile End Neighborhood Assembly's "In the Street for Social Strike": <http://cbmilstein.wordpress.com/2012/08/12/in-the-street-for-social-strike-montreal-night-110/> (you can also find many other blog posts on the student strike in Montreal via this link).

A charming glimpse of this kind of organizing can also be seen in the film *I'm a Fucking Panther* (<https://imafuckingpanther.wordpress.com/english/>), documenting a multiracial political group of young people living in Biskopsgården, a down-and-out suburb of Göteborg, Sweden, in their efforts to shift power, externally as well as within their group. At nearly every point, you witness the Panthers centering their attention squarely on solidifying social relations, whether through their openness to new members, by offering themselves as mediators in their neighborhood, or via their decision to include a fight among some members in the film along with how they worked through it.

In this piece, I'd like to focus in even more closely, at the more microscopic level of the everyday, well outside organizing and movements, when us "revolutionaries" make the choice to create spaces that are meant to be social yet in ways that really are social, which sadly seems a rather-neglected though truly revolutionary notion.

You may protest here, countering that it sounds self-evident to do so—as in, "Of course we are deeply concerned about the social relations underpinning our social spaces!" Yet I urge you to really think back to your own experiences for a second. Too many of us have had the displeasure of walking into a space for the first time, and getting blank or hostile glances as our welcome—and it usually goes downhill from there. It's frequently assumed that the tag "social space" (or radical bookstore, collective café, bike co-op, and so on) has already done the work for us, as if we are already those perfect actors in our perfectly alternative places.

For instance, to name only one, for over a year I went to a weekly open-to-all study group at an infoshop. The atmosphere was decidedly antagonistic, both toward me and my prejudged perspectives, but also toward most anyone who wandered new into the discussion and especially as a newbie to antiauthoritarian politics. After many months, a joke emerged that I needed to form the Friendly Anarchist Faction. The sad part was, I inadvertently ended up having to do just that, save for the organizational name. Following each two-hour study group, almost every week yet another newcomer would corner me outside on the street, hungry to actually talk about ideas in a cordial way. They perceived me as friendly and approachable, as encouraging of their exploration into concepts novel to them, as someone who cared about seeing them as a person and developing interpersonal connections. Such folks almost never returned for a second study group. And I grew tired of battling through the two hours inside the infoshop to then have to undo all the hostility in the air for two hours afterward, until the last train was about to leave to take me home.

This portrait isn't meant to valorize my behavior or me. For one self-criticism, by moving my more ideal social relations outside, I became complicit in replicating and upholding the rancorous environment inside the study group by not challenging it directly, especially by suggesting potential ways to handle it. Rather, it's intended to point out how exhausting as well as dispiriting it is to linger in social spaces that are antisocial, not to mention counterproductive to any notion of social transformation. The world at large already does too good a job of alienating us. (And capitalism is now doing an extra good job of commodifying friendliness, picking up on the very real desire for and lack of it in society generally. One frequently gets a warmer greeting, alas,

stepping into a Gap or Wal-Mart than an anticapitalist social space.) Such portraits of our numerous “missed connections” could fill volumes, particularly when we are in much more intensive need of care and solidarity (“things” that capitalism is busy commodifying, too, especially in the growth industry around caretaking and care workers).

Let’s do a polar-opposite turn to another example—and an extra-friendly one at that.

Sharing Our Vulnerabilities

My friend Carla who is open to failing, or intentionally passionate about what I’d call “sharing vulnerability” (something that increasingly seems a pivotal political act and indeed direct action), was one of the co-organizers of the Social Spaces Summit, held in the Unceded Salish Coast Territories (known also as Vancouver) in November 2013, along with the wonderful crew of Anthony, Dani, Kelsey, LeyAnn, and Nick. The summit was a three-day gathering of about fifty people, all part of various collectively run spaces, mostly in Canada, but with a sprinkling from the US Pacific Northwest and beyond. The organizing collective borrowed a few local political spaces, used for other ongoing purposes, for this convergence, with no intention of hosting the event again. The idea was to experiment with this summit for a second time—they’d organized the first one the previous year—and hand it over to another collective in another city, then to be envisioned as this new organizing body saw fit. (In fact, folks from Calgary gladly agreed to flesh out and host the next one.)

Here I want to zero in on some of the details of the summit in order to make plain the careful seeding of the ground for new social relations—or rather, the hard, tedious, often-invisible tending to the cultivation of those relations.

(Note: In an earlier draft of this essay—what I’d hoped was the final version—I included much more detail, especially about many of the workshops. But two of the summit organizers kindly spent hours reading and editing that draft. They felt that I should remove a substantial chunk of my microlevel analysis out of concern for summit participants, since I didn’t get prior consent to share, and the beauty of the summit was in participants’ willingness to share vulnerability without fear of it coming back to haunt them. I agreed, though it feels hard to know that much is now lost from the substance of what I wanted to express. I trust that what remains in this piece is nonetheless helpful.)

For starters, on a personal note, there was the personal care that Carla—a new friend, thanks to this summit—took in bringing me to the Unceded Coast Salish Territories. I’m fairly sure that she “found me” via my numerous Facebook and blog posts about my stint in Michigan from summer 2012 to October 2013, when I took care of my two sick, dying, and now-deceased parents. Because of this, I suspect, Carla then invited me to the gathering, offering me \$400 to make it possible. But due to the uncertainty of when my parents would transition from life to death, and the equal uncertainty of my own mental well-being in relation to that, I couldn’t muster a response. She held my hand, as it were, across cyberspace, telling me kindly to play it by ear depending on how I felt. When I finally said a yes—a couple weeks after my mom’s death—that I would indeed like to come, though couldn’t imagine pulling myself together enough to do a workshop, much less perhaps participate at all, Carla replied, to paraphrase: “Come; it’ll be good for you to be here, even if only to listen and be among friends, even if you need to step away from the summit and take care of yourself.”

This is worth remarking for several reasons.

When various ones of us get money to help with our travel expenses to DIY gatherings, it involves an exchange value: one gets to attend an anarchist bookfair, say, but one has to do a workshop. Such mutual financial aid, as sweet as it is, nonetheless reinscribes the instrumental value that capitalism places on us as people, even if toward better ends. Our “worth” is not about our inherent goodness but instead concerns the “good”—the service or product—that we supply to that event. If we don’t perform that service well or feel like we haven’t done so, it then feels like we haven’t delivered, like we are worthless (at least that’s what the voice inside me says, socialized as it also is by patriarchy), regardless of expressions of appreciation.

That the co-organizers would see the value in me being at the summit even if I wasn’t fully present was a subtle yet substantive blow at this underlying principle of capitalist logic. Carla and her collective viewed everyone who was at the summit—not only me—as having inherent value simply as humans trying to relate to each other in whatever ways they could. In fact, as I would come to realize over the three days, the whole point of the Social Spaces Summit was about organizing as if we matter as people for our own sake and toward each other. Surprisingly, delightfully as I would discover, it had almost nothing to do with organizing or talking about physical social spaces.

Moreover, through the vulnerability that I’d been publicly sharing in my writings, Carla had felt connected to me as a person, vulnerable in her own ways from her own past life experiences. Our electronic link made her want to connect with me in person. But from my writings, she understood how crucial the “gift economy” of bringing me into this space would be, without knowing what would come of it or expecting something in return. She recognized from the pain that I was articulating in print that I was in need of the empathy and tangible support of caring others, and without asking, gifted me time, space, and compassion: human goodness.

That in turn, did me worlds of good, reviving my flagging faith in anarchists’ ability to practice the care that they preached. Carla had also seemed to recognize that after over a year of caretaking labors, far from any anarchist world and, worse, frequently invisibilized by it, and now experiencing much loss, I was in need as a person of visible acts of caretaking coming my way without me having to ask.

During my time in Michigan, I referred to this as the “jello mold model,” where just when you were most tired and had no idea what to do, or felt all alone, for instance, some longtime neighbor of my parents or an old friend of theirs would bring a homemade casserole and jello mold, run an errand for you, or pitch in on some necessary task. As the many mid-Michiganders—mostly churchgoing, apolitical, and unthinkingly politically incorrect—I was surrounded by kept saying, “This is just what we do.” But sadly, it isn’t always what we—within our various political milieus—simply remember to actually do for each other, especially over the lengthy span it takes to construct new social relations.

And finally, as I saw at the summit’s end from the transparent budget that the collective shared with us all, there was a miniscule amount of money available; embarrassingly, from my perspective, they’d chosen to use pretty much the whole of the DIY travel fund on me. If I’d known that in advance, I’d have felt that nagging “I’m not worth it” mentioned above, declined the aid, and not joined in the summit. Yet through the process of being gifted that weekend in such a no-strings-attached manner—or more precisely, in a way that acknowledged my worth as a person—I surprised myself by rediscovering my own inner worth (self-love), which startlingly, in turn, opened up my heart to the joys of engaging with others in this social space. I was also later

able to recognize the lived anarchistic economy of intentional practices of kindness, when most needed, and the web that such lived behaviors start threading for future intentional practices of kindness that go in all sorts of positive directions.

Such visible generosity of spirit and open arms, as I briefly noted earlier, were extended to everyone who participated, though, as evidenced in the careful organizational choices—experiments—from beginning to closure. The summit was a laboratory for the creation of new people, or how we might co-mentor new ways of being in new relation to each other.

Undoing and Remaking Ourselves

The welcome set the tone from the get-go. Or more to the point, it modeled how we might practice vulnerability as a way to undo ourselves, borrowing from Judith Butler’s notion of “undoing gender,” and remake ourselves in the space of that collective uncertainty or queering.

The minute that anyone walked in the door to the summit space, one of the organizers (or several) rushed over with a big smile, introducing themselves, shaking hands and/or hugging, and then introducing the new person to others who had already arrived.

On the first evening, we gathered round for a welcome circle. I had expected the usual “name, city, what space are you with, and pronoun,” and then maybe a list of housekeeping tasks, scheduling items, and/or ground rules, all done with assured confidence and activist culture. Yet the welcome was structured around spotlighting our mutual awkwardness at suddenly being in a roomful of strangers, and from there, what it might mean to begin to connect as humans. The circle brought forth unscripted, heartfelt words, which centered on the “honor” of intentionally joining into community and communion with others. It openly allowed for the articulation of vulnerability, first through a laying out of various elements seen as crucial to forging relations among people by and large new to each other—senses of trust, collectively held history and intergenerational nurturance, gratefulness, and wholeness with the human as well as nonhuman world—and then by breaking bread together.

As the circle came to a close, and we dropped hands, someone suggested that the “elders” should get their food first, and many eyes turned toward several people—whether chronological elders or not—who folks perceived as mentors. One of those so-called mentors noted their uneasy at being cast in a role that, intentionally or not, set them apart, placing a sudden burden on them of having to supply inspiration versus simply share food, and perhaps, even if subtly, already shaping hierarchical relations in the room. Some of the alleged mentees’ eyes now flashed a quizzical look, fleetingly, and then brightened into recognition of how much we all had to offer in this space. A lively conversation at once ensued about what co-mentoring and multidirectional inspiration and indeed wisdom might look like, while, with laughter, in the silly pleasure of disrupting “relations as usual,” those who were most hungry or eager to eat began filling their plates.

The food itself also immediately created an opening for sharing our vulnerability during this welcome. One of the main folks who had cooked the meal was excited to introduce us to the dinner options: vegan and vegetarian food from donated, homegrown, and dumpstered ingredients; a new experiment in some gluten-free, vegan cookies, which might not be great (yet ... since the cookies would be an ongoing experiment throughout the weekend); and meat from a participant’s indigenous community in the Unceded Coast Salish Territories. It was a heaping

yet unpretentious meal, but the foodstuffs plainly laid out the conundrums we all face under capitalism, settler colonialism, and in our marginalized yet differentiated lives. The varied food choices provided another way to welcome those generative tensions into this space.

Even the eating setup forced a connective discomfort. The small tables served as silent facilitators for informal, randomly selected “breakout groups”; the warmth of the welcome and food functioned as icebreakers; and lively chatter arose, as if people had been friends for a while. Two of these new friends at my small table spoke with me about their newfound idea of the revolutionary potential of “slowness,” and what that might mean for crafting new relations in a new society, in contrast to the high-speed, high-tech sensibility that feels like it increasingly produces isolation.

As our plates emptied, the three of us felt increasingly knit. We also realized that we were all being hosted at the same collective house, so decided to test out slowness by meandering there together. A fifteen-minute walk took us at least thirty minutes, with us pausing to appreciate a community garden at one point and some amazing bushes outside some homes at another point.

Toward the end of the summit, one of these two new friends, Jeanette, handed me an envelope, and stood waiting patiently for me to open it. I looked at the plain white rectangle, with “Cindy” on its front, and now felt worthy of—and more pointedly, honored by—the ongoing caretaking she, like Carla, had exhibited toward me over the past few days. I asked if I could wait to open it, not out of discomfort at her gift, but because I wanted to do so slowly, per our initial dinner conversation, on a day when I was feeling particularly sad and needed care. A huge smile of mutual recognition spread across her face.

When I did ultimately unseal the envelope, about a week later, I found a sweet note. Sweeter still was the card itself, picturing three little animals, personified as hobos strolling (leisurely?) with knapsacks on sticks over their shoulders. Under each comradely creature, Jeanette had penned in her name, my name, and her friend’s name (the other person I’d met at the opening meal).

Over the summit weekend, she shared a story about another time that she’d used words and images as comfort-building and community-binding missives.

When many of her friends were all going through painful situations one winter, she had posted letters of encouragement to them, but publicly, on the walls of their city. She urged her friends to put up letters of their own outdoors. So began a communal dialogue about what usually is felt as a lonely individual crisis or failing. Random strangers could interact with the visible vulnerability of what it means to be human. It also created a public game that through play, collectively softened the hardships of Jeanette’s friends. And it served as an experiment in establishing a new civic social space premised on highlighting shared social relations, albeit within a temporary autonomous zone.

Lovely Letters

At the Social Spaces Summit, all the sessions were sort of like Jeanette’s letter, pushing as well as opening the envelope. Curiously, as I gestured to above, all of us participants rarely exchanged information about our respective spaces in any of the workshops. Conversely, we unexpectedly shared more and more about ourselves, which meant grappling together with all the goodness and damage within us.

We avoided the pragmatics and mechanisms of setting up and sustaining our spaces back home—a softer version of the hard instrumental logic of present-day society, and one that doesn't concentrate on who we are as people but only what we have to offer to help someone else's project later, say, or the cache of how cool our space might seem from the outside. We dived deep into the new forms of sociality that should be the *raison d'être* for them—the messy, complex, poignantly beautiful social ecology that just might underpin self-organized projects and places.

That, in turn, brought us into intimate contact with all the systems of domination, exploitation, and oppression that we, too, embody, but in the most mutually of understanding ways, allowing each of us to make mistakes and grow. Or better yet, it permitted us to collectively wrestle with, spill a few tears over, and laugh together through all types of difficult situations on a face-to-face level as we increasingly got to know and trust each other.

The space itself increasingly became social; the social increasingly built the space.

The linchpin here was that the “failings” of each and every session were foregrounded. The sessions were all experiments in how struggling toward new relations is coequal with struggling humanely through the ways that patriarchy, ableism, and colonialism, to name three, dredge up all sorts of bad behaviors, hurt, power imbalances, and friend-enemy dichotomies within our social spaces and political projects. These then serve to replicate or exacerbate the -isms we dream of destroying. Instead of jumping down each others' throats when mistakes were made—calling out or in, shaming, or banishing—we used these alleged slipups as constant gifts, presenting us with the social glue and found materials for collaboratively bringing new social relations into being in the here and now.

This wasn't accidental, as I indicated above in hinting at the curation put into the welcome circle. It seemed, in fact, to percolate through most of the organizing details. Many of us out-of-towners, for example, were strategically housed in specific homes for the summit. The organizing collective tried hard to place us not only in overnight housing that would meet our individual physical needs/desires; it also strived to find hosts that we would “click” or resonate with, politically as well as personally. Moreover, when any of us first arrived for the summit, an organizer (or two, or several) made sure to greet us warmly and introduce us to others. Such small acts of friendliness breed other acts in return, establishing a culture in which it starts to seem second nature to be sociable, even over the course of a few days. Again, this isn't revolution per se, nor sufficient to end hierarchy. But it definitely is the needed healthy soil for both.

Likewise, it appeared far from accidental that all the workshop facilitators were provided the necessary healthy ground on which to boldly test out their notions of other ways of being and behaving. This established a culture of shared vulnerability, a willingness to undo ourselves in front of each other, and a corresponding empathy toward each other. Or if someone was rusty at empathy, the summit created a climate for practicing it, unlike in present-day society, which doesn't encourage or school us in thinking or acting empathetically—which is, at heart, a way of truly seeing and acting on our shared humanness, and thus a threat to divide-and-conquer forms of social control.

The summit organizers did this by urging people to try things they hadn't done before, without knowing what would happen. Workshops facilitators were afforded the freedom to share and be themselves. This freed us all to want to compassionately and forgivingly work through all the many (many!) awkward moments that arose over the three days—moments of unintentional hurt and at times what might be dubbed political incorrectness. In turn, this set free new social relations, or what could be seen as embryonic elements of a new society. And it generously handed

us all take-home inspiration for how to intentionally strengthen social relations in our social spaces—not mere tricks, tips, or lessons but instead encouraging envelopes to open later, when we needed it most.

Writing and rewriting this, I’ve realized how difficult it is to capture the qualities of kindness that people are capable of in person. And even the act of attempting to portray it already does those nuanced relations of care a grave injustice. In the information age, we’ve almost forgotten that human communication—our very psyche—is retooled along with various technologies, including what we now consider the “social” to consist of. That people increasingly long for authentic connection and caring communities, and increasingly have almost forgotten how to practice that in person, with tender patience and slowness, only further underlines the critical role of nurturing spaces of collective vulnerability and compassionate experimentation.

Three categories, as I’ve labeled them here, or types of workshops formed the stuff of our in-person medium: honest failures, hands-on openness, and fiercely anti-retreating. (Again, in my “final” version of this essay, I had more detail here about numerous workshops, but my two caring editors convinced me to delete some of it; I’ll try to point, more vaguely, toward the crux of these categories.)

Honest Failures

Several of the workshops were intended as experiments in how we might better organize together in ways that might better assure collective cohesiveness, caring communities, and unity in our diversity. It was refreshing how in each and every case, the workshop organizers did indeed boldly take risks, trying out approaches, concepts, and exercises that they weren’t sure would work. And in each and every case, when their intent missed the mark and plainly harder conversations arose, the workshop leaders graciously, honestly switched gears, right smack dab in the midst of their session, along with all the participants, to explore why.

The beauty of such willingness was that it illuminated how our own socialization, including the impact of how we are read and treated by society and/or self-identify, is what often gets in our way of such coexistence, kindness, and solidarity. It revealed the subtle ways that socialization around top-down forms of social relations shapes the most minute of our efforts at power-with—frequently without our being able to see it ourselves, unless we create the social space to visibilize and verbalize it, “by accident,” in front of others.

The easy critique of these workshops was the disquieting way that the workshop leaders ended up unwittingly reproducing, say, heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist, or hierarchical norms that lend authority to certain bodies, skin colors, or types of knowledge. At any other gathering, this would likely have created tension in the workshops or, afterward, meanness behind the facilitators’ backs. Yet the forthrightness with which the various workshop presenters kept underscoring the experimental character of their method, and how willing they were during their workshops to not only listen to all the constructive concerns being raised but also repetitively adjust in midstream helped to complexify as well as destabilize “easy” complaints, such as someone speaking more often because of their skin color or gender. It also breathed an air of compassion into the room, so we could dive deeper.

The subtler critiques were thus the ones that nearly all the participants and ultimately the presenters ended up voicing aloud during workshops. This included how when we concentrate on

attempting to find guarantees for the successful creation and maintenance of social spaces, we too often leap over social relations, including ones shaped by racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and so on. And many of our efforts at guarantees rely on establishing binaries, which no matter how we try to word or reword them as a group, always seem to establish hierarchies of perceived “good” and “bad” between each binary choice. Everyone’s socialization, despite our best efforts, drives us to make judgments of which end of each binary is the “best.”

More crucial, rather than condemning each other a people, we found the breathing space here to take compassionate issue with manifestations of thinking and behavior, of which we too take part, though in varying and disproportionate ways. When we, for example, tried to unpack various binaries in how we typically organize, suddenly right in front of our eyes, we perceived all the ways that various ones of us forget to have empathy for various others of us in the room (and indeed, this world), and likewise fail to see the fullness bundled into all our conundrums.

The success of these workshops was that we engaged in what are typically really hard, really awful conversations—say, around gender and race—but the workshop leaders shifted the site of experimentation to stay present with conversations about all the erasures going on through, to follow the same example, a binary outlook. That made it feel comfortable to voice all the increasingly uncomfortable truths in our new social space. We were each able to put ourselves into someone else’s shoes to listen and better hear. We were able to speak self-reflectively, acknowledging how one person’s sense of what felt safe unwittingly, and too frequently, trampled another person’s feelings of security. And we tangled a lot with whether there are, in fact, ever any guarantees of safety.

Such egalitarianism in how we heard each other seemed to banish guilt and shame, which too often are used as wedges between people in radical/activist circles to shape various new “us/them” binaries that merely shift power-over relations as opposed to aspire to undo them. Without the fear of being shamed at the first hint of saying something “wrong,” people were put more at ease—and began to build trust enough—to mutually engage in honest dialogue, especially when difficult, around the ways that structures of power and forms of oppression unevenly impact people and communities. We used the verbal stabs and fumbles as gifts to scrutinize the myriad ways that alternative spaces bump up against our own limitations, and tried to truthfully maneuver through the dilemmas—already overdetermined by systems of domination and exploitation.

The honest failures of this category of workshops, intended to help us be better organizers, were healthy for us all. They highlighted that many of the “tried-and-true” strategies in today’s anarchist(ic) world too closely mirror the very social relations we are striving to dismantle. How do we avoid, for example, popular education/educator relations that end up solidifying forms of hierarchical authority, such as enacting one-way sharing of wisdom and expertise? Or how do we avoid doing antioppression work that all too often simply flips binaries (say, into women over men, people of color over whites, queers over straights, etc.), instilling shame, guilt, and uncritical solidarity as means of new forms of silencing and new divides, new dynamics of control, and ones that frequently concentrate on personal prejudice/privilege versus institutionalized structures of power? How do we actually envision and implement nonhierarchical caring communities, sans guarantees, that can account in practice from the get-go for queered kinship, healthy cycles of birth and death as well as sickness, stolen lands, wider ecosystems, and institutionalized classism and racism, not to mention the ways in which even the best of our principles are usually at odds?

The honest vulnerability in these workshops gave us all permission to bond around the difficulty of passing along experience and insight in ways that are egalitarian. It gave us permission to

test out ways of relating to each other that value everyone's life experiences, all the multifaceted ways that systems of power lord over different parts of us and our lives, and how we might learn from each other. And they did so without erasing the worth of gleanings from those who've done certain things many times before or the fresh perspectives of those new to various skills; without diminishing the multifarious experiences of being the target of exploitation, domination, or oppression; and by affirming that even when we try to trouble, or queer, social relations and how we organize society, it's still profoundly hard to undo the socialization imposed on us from birth, and reinforced daily by almost everything and everyone around us, by a hierarchical, oppressive society.

We all let ourselves be destabilized, together, and from there, handed shared permission to compassionately discuss what this might mean for nonhierarchical social relations in which our difference don't equal power-over others. These workshops sparked all sorts of good conversations that allowed for difficult concerns to be comfortably talked about together, even as those conversations became the basis for building trust, community, and closeness—new and improved social relations.

Hands-On Openness

Besides letting various workshop presenters experiment with new ideas—and thereby wander into honest failures that they felt comfortable sharing transparently with all the participants, especially once they inadvertently noticed it themselves—the second way that I and others began to practice more human social relations was through workshops that stressed hands-on exercises. These workshops involved multiple senses, and as such, opened up multiple parts of ourselves—to ourselves, but also among us. We listened not just to each other's words; we “listened” to sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. We listened, too, to our “sixth sense” of intuition, which perhaps means hearing what the nexus of our heart, mind, and body are trying to tell us.

Three workshops were compelling in this regard. All were based on what seemed at quick glance as hokey group exercises, or the kinds of icebreaker games that contrive to introduce strangers at such gatherings. Usually, icebreakers are mechanical, compulsory activities. For many people, such hands-on exercises can feel embarrassing, eliciting “performance anxiety” or “one-upsmanship.” They are a game to help us remember names, without any of the actual qualities of the person, or they unintentionally serve as triggers, bringing up -isms and hurts, but the “fun” and “laughter” of the icebreaker makes it feel inappropriate to raise what feels like not-so-fun, serious stuff. And because facilitators typically conceive of icebreakers as fun, there is little care or curatorial thought put into them in terms of how they build on each other, how they build trust, and how they could be exactly the spots where we start crafting substantively new, different forms of sociality. Icebreakers can be cold places indeed, frequently shutting us down.

I thus almost always avoid any hint of icebreaker or hands-on games, suddenly finding as gracious an excuse as possible to make a temporary exit. But in the spirit of experimentation, and especially pushing my own comfortable discomfort, I participated in such workshops at the Social Spaces Summit. When carefully curated, with aspirations of conjuring new social relations in social spaces, I discovered that such exercises could work magic toward those always-in-process ends. (In fact, I surprised myself by how much I, too, was opened up through hands-on activities,

despite bracing myself to hate them—so much so, that a couple weeks later, I even used one of them as a relevant piece of a short workshop intro I was giving at a new social center, where the exercise worked to further “socialize” the space and us strangers there.)

One workshop, for instance, seemed to be about getting-acquainted games, revolving around remembering each other’s name. Or so I thought. The repetition of our names in each game was almost beside the point, though. The exercises, a series of smaller and smaller circles, literally and figuratively, revolved around trust. Saying one’s name became a comfortable way into those circles, which served in actuality to deepen our relations with each other. Ostensibly teaching us a series of facilitation techniques— “open-source” material for all sorts of other spaces, or democratized means toward qualitatively participatory ends—this workshop was teaching us about how to slowly but surely, and noncoercively, make people feel trusting enough of each other to share more and more of themselves.

That trust became the building block for finding the strength to test out new ways of relating, beyond each of our respective strategies of usually protecting ourselves—ways that while understandable given the society we’re forced to live under, are the stuff of social estrangement, lack of communal belonging, and feelings of unworthiness. By the end of the workshop, we’d been carefully led through increasing levels of mutual recognition of who each of us really is, in those places we can’t see by looking at each other or don’t take the time to discover, thus supplying empathy. When accidental moments of potential hurts occurred in our hands-on exercises, we were better able to handle them with humility, grace, and shared problem solving. When we were afforded the chance to really be heard and seen for our inherent value, conversely, people gave visibly of themselves, and that served as the connecting ties of bringing us closer and closer.

One of the early icebreakers involved the whole group. You said your name, as in “I’m Cindy,” then used the first letter, “C,” for an animal who speaks to something inside you, “I’m Cindy, as in cat,” and then filled out why you picked “Cindy as cat” along with enacting a physical movement for that creature. We all then repeated each other’s names, animals, and movements, with much laughter.

It was the reasons for the choice of our respective animals, however, that brought out things we might want to say about ourselves and share with others that mattered, made OK because such personal sharing was couched in between fun. The fun and funny hands-on play also performed as insight into how we each wanted to be treated. I can’t remember exactly what I said about my inner “cat,” but it was something along the lines of how cats are independent, autonomous beings who seem like they don’t need anyone, but in fact they do; they self-determine who they want to be around and offer affection, yet are desirous of affection in return.

Since we were using our voices and bodies, our minds were loosened up to reveal a bit more than we likely all intended. And since people were literally mirroring back what we said and did, anything and everything we did was affirmed. We were affirmed, collectively, such that following this workshop, people “jokingly” but “seriously” practiced the various “animal ethics” toward each other that we’d each expressed in that circle.

On its own, I can certainly imagine this exercise to be merely silly, and it kind of felt that way at the time—until we moved on to other, smaller-circle experiments, each involving greater degrees of shared awkwardness and intimacy, and greater space for making mistakes that, without being able to go into detail, illustrated how much we all struggle and step on each other’s soft spots in varied ways, and how as trust is painstakingly constructed, we’re better armed to share and work through the damage.

On the surface, anyone can piece together various such hands-on exercise to use in workshops, social spaces, and so on, but the underlying ethics and aims behind using them, and how you curate them so as to gently bring people into greater levels of trust and caring, makes all the difference. And as modeled by the workshop facilitator, a hefty dose of positivity and being remarkably forthcoming about oneself help, too. Even separate from how this presenter choose to frame and facilitate such exercises, they are only impoverished means, for now, of how we might simply try to think about bringing intentionality to constructing trust, care, and empathy all the time within our so-called social spaces. That was the big “lesson” that opened up in these connective icebreakers.

Another hands-on workshop aided us in becoming attuned to all that is expanded when we pay attention to numerous of our other senses and abilities, especially when one or more of these senses or abilities drop away. We become more, not less. This workshop illuminated, viscerally, how we forget to use the whole of ourselves, the whole of our “bodies” and “knowledge,” in cooperatively working toward new social relations. We minimize other ways of knowing—be they feminist or indigenous, nonverbal or nonvisual, and so on. In this way, we fall back on the dominant society’s ways of knowing: through the lens of hierarchical educational institutions or organized religion, mainstream media, lifestyles of the rich and famous, and so forth.

In this second of my hands-on examples, we paired up with another person, and took turns leading and being lead. As the person being lead, we were asked to close our eyes, put one hand on the other person’s shoulder or hold their hand, and walk with them, as they carefully strolled with us outside, all the while describing things they were seeing, so we could “see” them too. We were asked to pay attention not only to what the person leading us around was sharing with us but also all that our other senses were “seeing” and sharing with us—from how the wind felt on our cheeks, to how the world smells as we pass by fresh-cut grass or an open garbage can, to distant sounds of dogs barking or music playing, to how our feet make sense of different terrain, all the way through to how it feels to sense trust through the touch of the person guiding us.

When we all returned to the Social Spaces Summit building, a big piece of blank paper was on the ground along with colored markers, and we were asked to map what we’d “seen.” Several people immediately tried to draw a literal road map of their route, and within seconds, we all “saw” how a standard street map—what we would usually see of our world—didn’t come anywhere close to mapping the power of our experience of manifesting trust, sharing our vulnerability, grasping so much more depth to the world around us and each other in the process. So others started adding smells, images, feelings, and sensations to our increasingly complexified, diverse, and beautiful map.

We had become more by exposing ourselves to more of what’s inside and around us, and sharing that together, as co-mentoring and caring companions, including what it means to not look with sympathy at someone we perceive as disabled but instead find empathy for all that can be gained by perceiving them in particular and ability in general differently, outside the ways that society “disables” us. A hands-on exercise seemingly about blindness, in short, revealed another ways of seeing, which is always a good first step in other ways of being and, I trust, changing the world.

The last hands-on experiment that I’d like to mention involved a hands-on exercise around, purportedly, self-care. The facilitator told a story of a difficult time in their life. A bunch of young children had joined us at this point, yet were clearly not interested in the workshop, so they played together in a corner of the room. Meanwhile, the workshop presenter began pulling var-

ious physical items out of a big bag, setting them almost ritualistically on the ground, with a self-loving explanation of each one and how it felt like self-aid: a couple boxes of different teas, bars of chocolate, candles, sage, pretty things to look at, colorful things to draw with, and so on. The gaggle of little kids suddenly got really excited, rushing over to sit on the floor in front of the growing pile of goodies. We were each asked to do some self-love, using any of these items, or by rooting around in our backpacks, the room, or our imagination for tangible things that could offer us comfort and shine care back onto ourselves.

That's when the kids transformed the basic premise, shifting individual goodies and solo self-tending into social goodness and mutual aid self-care. They dived into the heap, grabbing various bits and pieces, as the rest of us hesitated for a minute or two, until there was almost nothing left on the floor. It seemed as if the kids had sabotaged this last experiment of our summit.

But here's where mentorship can go in many directions. It was if the kids intuited that wrapping up our weekend should mean circling around to the sensibility of our welcome, yet now without awkwardness, and with the social relations in place to accept the gift of connectivity with grace, ease, and pleasure.

Instead of hanging on tightly to the items, the children organized into an informal collective to redistribute the social "wealth" to everyone in our temporary community. Chocolate bars were broken into tiny squares, laid out on the silvery paper they'd come in, and then carried around the room in little hands as solemn, silly offerings to us all. The kids initiated a tea party, passing out mugs and heating up water. They passed sage under our noses, and we breathed in the sense that we were all in this social-love together; that precisely through the mutual practice of sharing and caring, we win the war against dangerous times, and maybe begin to win battles, even tiny ones, against a dangerous society.

Fiercely Anti-Retreating

The last of my trio of workshop categories involved one of the few moments over the entire summit where we talked about a physical social space. It almost seemed inappropriately out of place, given that the summit was, as mentioned already, about how we pay attention to collectively cultivating the social, not collectively managing the space.

Spaces matter. Likely more so than ever, given the increasing isolation, precariousness, and anxiety foisted on us by everything from "social" media and gentrified displacement, to climate mass-disasters and new forms of extractive theft like pipelines, to prison as the new Jim Crow, and on and on. That we're put in all sorts of solitary confinements, psychically, materially, and physically, and broken down as humans, estranged from each other, is no accident. It's a key mechanism of social control. Depressed, despairing, and abandoned individuals find it hard to gather the strength, much less motivation, to resist, and then feel totally alone in their misery. So yes, collective spaces are essential, if only to remember that we're not in this by ourselves, and from there, rediscover our power-together.

As I noted much earlier in this essay, we're really bad at sustaining such spaces, though, even beyond the repression and economic pressure we experience in doing so. We somehow think that if we share tips about the mechanisms of keeping our spaces alive—at convergences and bookfairs, in workshops and zines—that our social centers will survive all the "mistakes" us humans will invariably make within our beloved countercommunities.

Yet we shy away from sharing the truth of the messiness within our spaces and ourselves, as if we're "airing dirty laundry." Or worse, we fall back on revengeful, punitive, or us versus them narratives when we humans "fail" each other and our spaces. Too frequently, furthermore, those with the most bullying voices become acrimonious, mean-spirited, and self-aggrandizing in public, which typically these days is the "public sphere" of social media. This generally has the effect of heightening or making caricatures of the predicaments we confront in our spaces, rather than creating room for dealing with them together, even as it almost gleefully thwarts the cultivation of compassionate social relations, silences people, and shuts down dialogue.

The so-called solutions to all the human imperfections that arise in our spaces, not to mention the allegations and especially perpetration of harm and violence, usually become radical chic versions of statist "justice." This is not because we're horrible people per se but because the socialization we receive within nation-states makes it incredibly difficult to envision and enact nonstatist justice—in form, content, and/or premise. So we stumble, nearly always badly, through our answers, usually falling back on punishment, soft and hard. Lately, that seems to revolve around methods such as enforcing shame, banishment, and exclusion, labeling someone for life as a bad person, demanding financial reparations, creating rigid categorical hierarchies of who is unquestionably right and who is unquestionably wrong, or attacking someone's property or body. While we may want to make judicious use of some of these tools in specific contexts, similar to statist punishments, they rarely make amends for, repair, and/or heal the damage to individuals and communities.

The workshop titled Táala Hooghan Infoshop: Indigenous Established Anti-Colonial and Anti-Capitalist Radical Resource and Action Center since 2007, however, took a different tack. It was facilitated by Klee, one of the longtime collective members of this infoshop in Flagstaff, Arizona, and initially, he dazzled us with a collectively made video, created by some of the indigenous youths who've been the core of this space, along with slides and stories from Táala Hooghan. This was one of the few moments over the entire summit where we talked about a physical social space. It almost seemed inappropriately out of place, given that the summit was, as mentioned already, about how we pay attention to collectively cultivating the social, not collectively managing the space.

Like all the space carved out at this summit for sharing our vulnerabilities, this one, too, served not as mere a straightforward, uncritical how-to but rather a springboard for empathetic dialogue around the real-life dilemmas we all face in aspiring to kick out the colonizer and capitalist, among other internalized roles, within us. The inspiration that Klee supplied was in how transparently forthcoming he was in portraying the genuine, not-easily addressed conflicts and conundrums they'd faced—and are still facing—as a self-organized counterinstitution, without ever excluding himself from this picture. He held out the problematic that Táala Hooghan, like any anarchist(ic) space, continually runs into, especially those involving who we are—versus who we wish we were, or who we hope to become.

This wasn't simply part of how he'd structured the workshop; it was a practice that seemed integral to the Flagstaff infoshop: visibly holding on to, and being curious about, all the contradictory tensions we'll always encounter in such projects, until we somehow are qualitatively better people coexisting in a qualitatively better form of social organization. Thus, instead of merely writing the words "anti-colonial" and "anti-capitalist" on the infoshop's brochure, the Táala Hooghan collective, at least according to Klee's depiction of it, tries to practice what it might mean to strive toward social relations that undo colonialist and capitalist ways of being.

For one, the infoshop is grappling openly with the contradiction of what it might mean to buy a building for itself. On the one hand, this act would afford self-managed stability, ensuring that the radical social space remains open for the long haul, embedded in a neighborhood that's home to many poor and indigenous folks. On the other hand, such ownership goes against the ethos of honoring the theft of the land from indigenous people in the past as well as indigenous notions of whether land should be owned at all versus seen as commons for nonhumans and humans alike. How does an "anti-colonial" space relate to what might be seen as an act of colonizing again, especially in relation to the logic of a capitalism that gentrifies neighborhoods and displaces people from their communities? When asked how they are responding to this question, Klee replied that they are trying hard to keep the tension alive, for all to see and discuss, because until we live in a different society, that in itself is the answer.

Then, too, there apparently is a collective awareness at the infoshop of the difference, especially in practice, between responsibility and accountability. Klee noted how his infoshop had moved from accountability processes to instead struggling to be responsible toward each other precisely because of the gap in conceiving of what these words mean not only in theory but especially in practice.

In his workshop, we tossed around various understandings of these two perspectives, and what I took from the conversation was this: accountability too easily replicates logics within state and capital. It signifies both hard-and-fast laws that must be followed or punishment will ensue, entailing quantifying whether one meets that accounting sheet of behaviors or not. It sets standards outside ourselves that we have to mechanically follow, almost without thought, and without being in relation to others or particular contexts.

Responsibility, in contrast, carries within it a far more mutualistic, egalitarian sensibility. How do we conceive of the social whole and the goodness within it? How do we see ourselves as being cognizant of our role in that goodness, and not sit back to let some other entity (the collective, or usually, the boss, police, bureaucrats, or nonprofits) fix things for us? Responsibility ties us together; accountability sets us apart, relating us through a list of dos and don'ts rather than each other. And responsibility is about context and the diverse situations we find ourselves in; with each new circumstance, we need to work through all the emergent dynamics and potential, varied resolutions.

Klee spoke of a time that a serious issue came up at Táala Hooghan. The collective initially decided to set up a retreat to hash through the situation. But it quickly realized that this wasn't some aberration or a one-time concern, or something that was "outside" the community.

So the collective came up with the notion of an anti-retreat. As Klee explained it, instead of retreating from the community and taking problems away from it, the collective decided to fiercely walk toward all the hurts, pain, and troubling questions of this and other difficult concerns—all the awfulness we humans are capable of, intentionally or not. Sometimes that might involve convening in a retreat-like setting; sometimes it might involve one-on-one conversations or larger community forums; and sometimes combinations thereof. Yet always, the aim was fierce engagement, which hung tightly to ongoing conundrums, stayed open to the contradictions, and aspired toward ever-greater forms of community cohesiveness while collectively, compassionately addressing our responsibility to treat each other with dignity, respect, and mutuality.

The notion of fiercely anti-retreating—fiercely yet empathetically moving toward the whole of who we are and could be, reaching toward better social relations and thus more humane practices—seemed apropos of the sentiment of this entire summit.

The Beginning of the End

Carla and the Social Spaces Summit collective allowed for and encouraged mistakes and failures through allowing for and encouraging experimentation. They gave us all permission to be the imperfect humans who we are, and to see that we all fall into the traps laid by our socialization in a society structured around racism, patriarchy, ableism, ageism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and all sorts of social relations (not to mention systems!) of domination. We all have the capacity to hurt, insult, and trigger each other, to do violence against each other's minds and bodies, and bring out the worst sometimes, even if all that is far from our intentions. That we have so few spaces that specifically hold us, collectively and individually, in a warm embrace as we try to undo ourselves, our socialization, is our greatest failing, though.

So the tenderly curated ground at this summit to meet each other on the terrain of truth, dignity, and shared vulnerability was rare indeed—and a success that we rarely experience. We generated a space of sociality through our sociality at this summit, and one that felt more genuinely anarchist(ic) and caring than the vast majority of actually existing anarchist projects that proclaim shared principles on paper.

That everyone stepped up to that challenge—fiercely yet kindly chose not to retreat—was not because the organizers handpicked a remarkable group of people. It was because the culture that we are capable of creating together within our spaces does matter to who we are all able to become, and thus what kinds of caring communities we are capable of starting to practice and, I trust, more frequently constitute. Neither is Carla or the summit organizing collective remarkable. What distinguished them was their perspective on how one might achieve a society without hierarchy, but with freedom, dignity, democracy, and love. They aspired toward goodness, generalized and determined by those facing each other in person, instead of a predetermined set of what anarchists (or any political actors) are for and especially against. Or to put it another way, the summit for me became a way of enacting social goodness as dual power.

In the ongoing, always-changing youth space called the Purple Thistle in the Unceded Coast Salish Territories—a shape-shifting space that Carla serves as “director” of, beholding to the collective decisions of the teens and young folks who use the center—there are never any stable activities. A room used for learning animation skills one year might, the next year, based on the then-participants' interests, become a silk-screening lab, darkroom, or bike repair workshop. The space is in continual experimentation based on the needs and desires, decisions and social relations, of those engaged in it.

The only constant at the Purple Thistle are the three rules. The first two are rather specific: “We are a dry place,” and “Nap here if you like, but only in the daytime.” The third—or what's listed as number one—captures the sensibility that the summit organizers seemed to bring to all their engagements, including the Purple Thistle: “No assholeism.” Which is another way of saying, try one's damndest to be a good person and make a good space for everyone else; know that we'll also mess up a lot in the process; and when we do, always be committed to fiercely hashing it out together, as exactly the work of changing the world and ourselves.

Being good to each other, forging new social relations in the shell of the old, isn't going to end capitalism, smash the state, or nix all oppressions. It is nevertheless the prefigurative half of this herculean task. We also simultaneously need to constitute and experiment with new social organization. And both will only be as “good” as the dialectic between the goodness we struggle

toward in our individual and institutional practices, growing, affirming, and reinforcing each other against all the hierarchical, oppressive horrors that batter us on all sides.

The end of capitalism won't be a single, magical new day or jumping over a barricade to a rainbow-perfect society. It will be a series of fits and starts, unsteady, haphazard, and hurtful at times, across peoples and communities, until we reach an epoch that can safely be labeled something beyond capitalism. And if we're lucky, and really good at perpetually testing out forms of goodness, maybe it will be something approximating a far more caring society, filled with egalitarian social relations and social organization.

As I said earlier in this essay—this letter in an envelope with your name on it—I know that I haven't done justice by a long stretch to describing “organizing social spaces as if social relations matter.” The one and only way to do so is to try it out for yourself in person. You'll know when it's working because you'll feel it, like many of us did in the miraculously grand spaces of Occupy and other uprisings. So let's all get going to boldly, imaginatively, sometimes with success and oftentimes with failure, give it a friendly new go in our favorite real-life spots of everyday anarchism.

Notes:

I'm grateful to the *ROAR Magazine* collective in general and Joris in particular for kindly agreeing to publish a shorter version of this essay, and patiently waiting for me to finish it. I encourage you to check out this wonderful online journal at <http://roarmag.org/>.

I wholeheartedly want to thank all the summit organizers for their care and curation. I focused on Carla in this essay because I had the most contact and connection with her, and because she went way beyond the call of mutual aid with editorial help on this piece. Carla's writing can be found via @joyfulcarla. Nick, another summit organizer, was equally awesome around giving of his time and smarts to help edit this piece. He blogs at <http://cultivatingalternatives.com/>. I'm beyond-words grateful to them both!

The Thistle Institute, a radical alternative to the university and organizing entity for the Social Spaces Summit, can be discovered at <http://thistleinstitute.ca/>, and you can check out the Purple Thistle Centre for youth arts and activism at <http://www.purplethistle.ca/>.

I'd love for you to continue to read my wordsmithing. Sign up to receive notices when I post to my blog, Outside the Circle, cbmilstein.wordpress.com. Share, enjoy, and repost too—as long as it's free as in “free beer” and “freedom.” And if you find any typos in this particular essay, I'd appreciate an email, so I can fix 'em (cbmilstein@yahoo.com).

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Cindy Milstein
Organizing Social Spaces as if Social Relations Matter
June 14, 2014

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