

NO! Against Adult Supremacy Vol. 8

Various Authors

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The Sound of Our Movement Growing

Victoria Law

Last week I was part of *Queering Abolition*, a panel discussion on queer and trans prison advocacy and abolition. One of my co-panelists was Susan Rosenberg, a former political prisoner who spent 16 years in prison before her sentence was commuted by outgoing President Bill Clinton. The panel was in the auditorium of the City University of New York Graduate Center. Being on the panel was exciting — not just because I was part of a dialogue around prison advocacy and abolition that centered on trans people, but also because it reminded me of how far I'd come and how much community and movement support have enabled me.

I first saw Susan Rosenberg in that same auditorium about 12 years ago. She had been released from prison the year before and was part of a day-long conference on incarceration. My daughter was not quite two years old and, like many political events — both then and now — there was no child care. The organizers told me that I was welcome to bring my child and so I did.

She had a fantastic time. My daughter, after nursing for a bit and sitting in my lap for an even shorter bit, wriggled out of my arms and explored the back rows of the auditorium. The seats were like those in the movie theater, springing up when no weight was applied. She was entranced with these seats, pulling them down and letting them flip back up with a clatter. She did this again and again, much to the amusement of the handful of 20-somethings around us. I kept one eye on her and one eye on the stage where, far below, Susan Rosenberg, Laura Whitehorn and two other important people in the prison movement talked about women and incarceration. When the audience erupted into applause, my daughter stopped and applauded along. “Yaaaay!” she cheered, as she clapped her tiny hands together over and over.

Partway through the next panel, she grew bored with the back row and began making her way down the aisle. I let her get about 10 feet away from me before grabbing her and carrying her back. She did this several times, growing more and more confident navigating the shallow slope. Then, she began to run towards the stage and the stairs leading to the stage, steps that are oh-so-alluring in the eyes of a not-quite two-year-old. By then, only a sliver of my attention was on the discussion on-stage; most of it was on my daughter and trying to keep her from disrupting the conference. So, we left.

Twelve years later, I was back in that same room — not as a harried and under-supported parent this time, but as a panelist. Unlike the last time, as I set foot in the auditorium, the organizers of *Queering Abolition* (Black and Pink — NYC, which supports queer and trans people inside prisons) offered child care. And it also made me think about all the ways, between those two events and those 12 years, that people in various movements and communities stepped up to support me as a mother in their midst, enabling me to learn, grow and continue to be part of social justice organizing. Without their support, I might have kept on being the person who left discussions and events until I grew tired of even trying.

But I'm lucky. There are so many people who have recently become parents or primary caregivers who don't have that kind of support — or people in their lives who understand the need for support and are willing to help meet that need. We parents know that we need support if we're going to continue being part of political organizing, but it's overwhelming and exhausting to continually ask our supposed comrades if they can accommodate our new needs. It's even more overwhelming and exhausting when the answer is no.

In 2003, I met China Martens, a mother in Baltimore who would become my co-conspirator for what we called the “all-ages child care revolution.” What we realized, early on, is that, rather than trying to get parents to take on the additional responsibility of building their support networks, it's much more effective to talk to people who do not have caregiving responsibilities and make them understand the importance of supporting parents and caregivers' participation. People without children (or other caregiving responsibilities) have more time to help out, to plan support strategies and to advocate for family-friendly movement spaces and events. It shouldn't always fall on those most directly affected (and exhausted) to have to create these spaces on their own. That's a pretty sure way to push them away from organizing work.

Here are some ways that helped and can easily be applied to your own organizing work. They don't require a huge amount of resources, but do demonstrate a commitment to creating movements that accommodate all ages.

Provide child care

Child care doesn't need to be elaborate. It does need to be in a room that is clean and safe, meaning that there are no hazards for a small child. Ideally two (or more) people should be doing child care so that, if an emergency arises, no children are left alone.

Child care does require a commitment from the organizers that it is a priority and should not be left until the last minute. It should also be clearly announced on all outreach and publicity. Otherwise, parents assume that there is no child care and will stay home.

If you don't have a rapport with kids, find other ways to help

Be the one to come in early, clean the room and make sure there are no choking hazards, exposed electrical outlets, plastic bags or sharp objects. Crawl on the floor and look at the room as if you were a baby. What do you see there that might be dangerous? Not sure what constitutes a choking hazard? If it seems like it would fit through a toilet paper tube, get it out of there!

Offer to be the one on call if an emergency arises and ferry information to the appropriate person. If a child suddenly misses their caregiver or doesn't feel well, be the person to locate the caregiver and make sure they get to the room quickly.

Have food

The organizers of *Queering Abolition* served dinner (a vegan and gluten-free dinner at that), and made sure to announce that fact on all of their publicity.

For parents, having food at an evening meeting or event may be the deciding factor as to whether they attend or whether they hustle their child(ren) home after school and fix them supper. (Even people without children will appreciate not having to choose between eating dinner and attending a meeting or event.)

Be prepared to have children in the room

This might sound like it contradicts the first point, but it doesn't. Even when you provide child care, some children don't want to be so far from their caregivers (and vice versa). Be prepared to have children in the meeting or event space. If you're the facilitator or a speaker, make an announcement about children's presence beforehand so that parents don't feel obliged to leave

the room once their child(ren) start making noise. When he notices children in the room, Jason Lydon of Black and Pink Boston announces, “Children’s noise is the sound of our movement growing.” I’ve taken to saying that too and, when I do, I’ve noticed that not only do parents visibly relax, but others in the room don’t give them the side-eye.

Have toys and activities for kids to do. When my daughter turned two, a fellow volunteer at ABC No Rio, a community arts center, bought her a bag of wooden blocks, which we kept there. We also kept a basket of toys for her so that whenever she came with me or her dad, she would have a variety of things to do. Similarly, the office of Women on the Rise telling HerStory, or WORTH, an advocacy organization of formerly incarcerated women, had a crib, children’s books and toys.

Be the person who gets down on the floor and plays with the kid in the room

Children, particularly young children, don’t like being left to play by themselves, even if they are in the middle of the room. Be the person who gets down on the floor to color with them or build a fabulous structure out of blocks. You can still keep an ear on the discussion — trust me, I know from years of experience — while also allowing the parent or caregiver to participate more fully.

This also applies to spaces where organizing grows: At WORTH, when a staff member had a baby, she brought him to the office regularly and everyone took responsibility for him. They held him so that she could have two hands free to meet her responsibilities. They fed him when he was hungry. They changed his diaper. And, when he began to toddle around, they followed him and made sure he didn’t hurt himself or wreak too much havoc on the office.

Supporting the all-ages revolution doesn’t end when the meeting or event comes to a close. You can incorporate these into your everyday life — and make a new friend in the process!

Doing something a child might enjoy? Invite that kid along!

Do you have a plot in a garden? Do you love to skateboard or bike? Do you bake cookies, make giant puppets or quilt? Invite a kid to join you. It may be slow-going at first to teach a three-year-old how to safely wield a needle or not to rub glue or paint in their hair, but they learn quickly. In the meantime, you’re giving them an opportunity to experience something new while also giving their caregiver a probably much-needed break.

Start to develop relationships with caregivers and children in your movements and communities

It can start with inviting them over to have dinner (or lunch or brunch). Get to know them — and let them get to know you. Asking for help from people who are virtually strangers can be difficult but, as they grow to know you better, caregivers and kids will feel easier letting you know what they need, as well as what doesn’t work for them. And you’ll get to know them and figure out ways that you and those around you can accommodate their needs so that they can stay involved.

This is far from an exhaustive list. There are many different ways to help build an all-ages revolution. My co-conspirator China and I put together Don’t Leave Your Friends Behind originally as a zine series and, two years ago, as an edited anthology, to include the many different ways that caregivers, kids and others in their community have worked to create all-ages movements.

Religion and Trauma

Marlene Winell

Children learn very early to repress independent thinking and not to trust their own feelings. For truth, believers rely on external authority – Scripture and religious leaders. With the consequences of disbelief so severe, leaders are able to demand acceptance of farfetched claims at the expense of personal observation or scientific evidence. The culture rewards individuals who contribute in religious ways. Proselytizing is generally expected, even for children. Obedience is the highest value and personal development truncated.

Clearly, psychological problems can develop long before the additional trauma of leaving the fold. I'll use the example of Bible-based fundamentalisms. True to the definition of trauma, survivors of these report feelings of terror, helplessness, and horror in facing death and injury – the horror of Jesus' death (along with other atrocities in the Bible), the terror of hell for oneself and everyone else, and the helplessness of being a frail human in a wicked world, a tiny player in an overwhelming cosmic drama.

Toxic Teachings

There are different churches in this category with beliefs and practices that vary but core doctrines are consistent. All of the major authoritarian religions have enormous psychological control because they are based on fear, which is the most primitive and powerful human emotion. Secondly, they emphasize shame; humans are bad and need redemption. So the basic meme complex passed on to each generation of children is that you need religion in order to survive and in order to be acceptable.

Eternal Punishment

The first key doctrine is eternal damnation (or annihilation) for all unbelievers. This is the terrifying backdrop for the salvation message presented to all newcomers and all children born into the faith. The Bible is quoted, including the words of Jesus, to paint a horrifying picture of hell as a lake of fire, a fire of eternal torture impossible to quench despite any pleading. Mormons describe a hell of "outer darkness" that is cold and just as terrifying. Jehovah's Witnesses threaten the horror of dying forever at Armageddon and missing out on Paradise. Small children can obviously visualize these things while not having the brain capacity to evaluate the message. Moreover, the powerful social context makes rejecting these teachings impossible. Children are completely at the mercy of religious adults.

The salvation formula is offered as a solution of course, but for many, it is not enough to ward off anxiety. How does one really know? And what about losing one's salvation? Many adults remember trying to get "saved" multiple times, even hundreds of times, because of unrelenting fear.

I feel like much of my life was lived in fear. I am reading all I can to continue to find peace from what I've been taught. I still fear and I am 65.

I feel little hope, because I don't know how it is remotely possible for me to ever let go of my fear of hell. If I give up my belief system, I'll go to hell. Even though my whole life has been so unhappy in the church – it has brought me nothing but turmoil and heartbreak and disappointment and unanswered questions and dissatisfaction.

“Left behind” Terror

Another horrible fear is about missing the “rapture” when Jesus returns. I have heard many people recount memories of searching for parents and going into sheer panic about being left alone in an evil world. Given that abandonment is a primary human fear, this experience can be unforgettably terrifying. Some report this as a recurring trauma every time they couldn't find a parent right away.

During my freshman year in college, I started having nightmares. In my dreams, the rapture would happen and I would be left behind, or worse, sent to hell. Several times I woke up just before I was tossed into the flames, my mouth open, ready to scream. My mind was crying out, “Please, Jesus! Forgive me! I'm sorry I wasn't good enough! I'm sorry!”

After twenty-seven years of trying to live a perfect life, I failed... I was ashamed of myself all day long. My mind battling with itself with no relief... I always believed everything that I was taught but I thought that I was not approved by God. I thought that basically I, too, would die at Armageddon.

Surrounded by Threat

Believers simply cannot feel safe in the world if they take to heart the teaching about evil everywhere. In the fundamentalist worldview, “the World” is a fallen place, dangerously ruled by Satan and his minions until Jesus comes back and God puts everything right. Meanwhile it's a battleground for spiritual warfare and children are taught to be very afraid of anything that is not Christian. Much of “the World” is condemned at church, and parents try to control secular influences through private and home schooling. Children grow up terrified of everything outside the religious subculture, most of which is simply unfamiliar.

I was raised on fire and brimstone, speaking in tongues, believing the world was a dangerous and evil place, full of temptation and sinners seeking to destroy me/drag me down.

Some groups place more emphasis on literal teachings about demons, and believers learn to be afraid of evil spirits lurking everywhere. Being saved is a “covering” and one must put on the “whole armor of God” to go about ordinary life. A frequently quoted verse with a terrifying image is I Peter 5:8, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”

Self as Bad

Second to the doctrine of hell, the other most toxic teaching in fundamentalist churches is that of “original sin.” Human depravity is a constant theme of fundamentalist theology and no matter what is said about the saving grace of Jesus, children (and adults) internalize feelings of being evil and inadequate. Most of these churches also believe in demons quite literally, some to the point of using exorcism on children who misbehave. One former believer called it “bait-and-switch theology – telling me I was saved only to insist that I was barely worth saving.”

I've spent literally years injuring myself, cutting and burning my arms, taking overdoses and starving myself, to punish myself so that God doesn't have to punish me. It's taken me years to feel deserving of anything good.

Believers can be understood to be in the crazy-making situation of a double bind – having heavy personal responsibility to adhere to religious rules but not having the ability to do so. Never is God blamed for not answering prayer or empowering the faithful as promised.

I spent most of my life trying to please an angry God and feeling like a complete failure. I didn't pray enough, read enough, love enough, etc.

To think you are good or wise or strong or loving or capable on your own is considered pride and the worst sin of all in this religious worldview. You are expected to derive those qualities from God, who is perfect. Anything good you do is credited to God and anything bad is your fault. You are expected to be like Him and follow His perfect will. But what if it doesn't work? Fundamentalist Christianity promises to solve all kinds of personal problems and when it does not, it is the individual that bears the paralyzing guilt of not measuring up.

I have tried to use this brand of Christianity to free myself from the depression and addictions that I have struggled with from childhood, and have done all the things that "Christianity" demanded I do. I have fasted, prayed, abstained from secular things, tithed, received the spirit, baptized in the spirit, read the Bible, memorized Scripture, etc. etc. None of it has worked or given me any lasting solution... I have become so desperate at times, that I have wanted to take my own life.

Demon Possession

A special form of abuse occurs when children are actually accused of being demon possessed. This can happen when children misbehave, parents are incompetent, or children's behavior is misinterpreted in spiritual ways, often with the help of clergy. I have heard many stories of this kind of labeling, which is of course the ultimate in both shame and fear. Forced exorcisms are also all too common, even in this modern day, and certainly qualify as trauma, lasting into adulthood.

When your parents exorcised you and said you had "unclean" spirits that was very very wrong. To believe a child can have demons just shows how seriously deluded your parents really were. You have spent your whole life being scared... being scared of your dad, of God, of hell, the rapture, the end of the world, and death as well as the dark.

Cycle of Abuse

A believer can never be good enough and goes through a cycle of sin, guilt, and salvation similar to the cycle of abuse in domestic violence. When they say they have a "personal relationship" with God, they are referring to one of total dominance and submission, and they are convinced that they should be grateful for this kind of "love." Like an authoritarian husband, this deity is an all-powerful, ruling male whose word is law. The sincere follower "repents" and "rededicates," which produces a temporary reprieve of anxiety and perhaps a period of positive affect. This intermittent reinforcement is enough to keep the cycle of abuse in place. Like a devoted wife, the most sincere believers get damaged the most.

I prayed endlessly to be delivered from those temptations. I beat my fists into my pillow in agony. I used every ounce of faith I could muster to overcome this problem. "Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil" just didn't seem to be working with me. Of course, I blamed it on myself and thought there was something wrong with me. I thought I was perverted. I felt evil inside. I hated myself.

I do not want to give up my faith in Christ or God but I have NEVER been able to hold onto my own decisions or to make them on my benefit without IMMENSE PAIN re: God's will which I was supposed to seek out but could not find.

Don't Think, Don't Feel

Fundamentalist theology is also damaging to intellectual development in that it explicitly warns against trusting one's own mind while requiring belief in far-fetched claims. Believers are not allowed to question dogma without endangering themselves. Critical thinking skills are under-valued. Emotions and intuitions are also considered suspect so children learn not to trust

their own feelings. With external authority the only permissible guide, they grow up losing touch with inner instincts so necessary for decision making and moral development.

Fundamentalism makes people crazy. It is a mixture of beliefs that do not make sense, causing the brain to keep trying to understand what cannot be logical.

I really don't have much experience of decision making at all. I never made any plans for my adult life since I was brought up to believe that the end of the world would come.

I suppressed a lot of my emotions, I developed cognitive difficulties and my thinking became increasingly unclear. My whole being turned from a rather vibrant, positive person to one that's passive and dull.

Abuses of Power

Added to these toxic aspects of theology are practices in the church and religious families that are damaging. Physical, sexual, and emotional harm is inflicted in families and churches because authoritarianism goes unchecked. Too many secrets are kept. Sexual repression in the religion also contributes to child abuse. The sanctioned patriarchal power structure allows abusive practices towards women and children. Severe condemnation of homosexuality takes an enormous toll as well, including suicide.

I had so many pent up emotions and thoughts that were never acknowledged... Instead of protecting me from a horrible man, they forced me to deny my feelings and obey him, no matter what. It's no wonder I developed an eating disorder.

So while the religious community can appear to offer a safe environment, the pressures to conform, adhere to impossible requirements, and submit to abuses of power can cause great suffering, which is often hidden and thus more miserable.

Your part here...Ageism is an LGBT Issue

Kathleen Nicole O'Neal

In the LGBT community, we rightly spend a lot of time discussing (if not exactly acting on) the problems facing the youngest members of our community. Suicide, harassment in schools, bias-motivated crimes, rejection at home (sometimes leading to homelessness), obstacles to trans-related and sexual healthcare, religiously motivated bigotry in local communities, and general feelings of hopelessness and malaise have become classic examples of the way heterosexism impacts our young people.

We are quick to look at these dynamics and express outrage over the role that heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia play in the lives of young LGBT people. With the advent of the “It Gets Better” project, bemoaning the way in which our society hurls abuse at LGBT youth has become something of a cliché.

It is a positive step in the right direction that LGBT people and their supporters are finally paying attention to the toll bigotry takes on youth. However, our analysis rarely goes deep enough to begin to unpack the intersectional role that ageism plays in these tragedies. As long as we refuse to take into account the way that ageist social structures unnecessarily inhibit the liberty, equality, and pursuit of happiness of our youngest LGBT people, our analysis of the problem will be toothless and incomplete.

Not long after I came out as bisexual, I became involved in the youth rights movement. Because young people are basically treated as parental property until they turn 18 years old, are confined in schools not of their choosing for most of their waking hours, and have limited mobility due to their impotence at the hands of law and custom, almost every avenue available to LGBT adults to improve their lots is closed to them.

This is neither natural nor inevitable – it is a function of the way our government and society relates to young people. It is ultimately harmful to all youth, but LGBT youth often suffer the most. And no matter how many same-sex couples are able to marry or how many anti-discrimination ordinances are passed, these problems will remain until we get serious about the fact that ageism is an LGBT issue.

Were LGBT youth persecuted in their schools able to choose to educate themselves elsewhere; were our young people able to emancipate themselves from problematic home situations; were young people able to invoke legal rights against parents who send them to facilities for “troubled teens” due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, we would not see the same degree of problems that we do among young LGBT people – even if a significant segment of society never supported our equality.

When Constance McMillan bravely endured her prom fiasco we shook our collective heads and asked why the school would not let her bring her date to prom. Instead we should have shaken our heads and wondered why she was forced to attend school among such a den of vipers

to begin with. When we tell our youth “it gets better” we should be asking ourselves “Why do we feel it has to be so bad for them now?” and we should also be saying that “We can do better.”

LGBT rights advocates must become youth rights advocates too. For all our talk of intersectionality and challenging privilege, we almost never seriously discuss – let alone plan our activism around – the ways in which ageism intersects with heterosexism to make life harder than need be for so many LGBT young people. Until we get serious about confronting the political, social, economic, and cultural ways in which our society oppresses all young people, LGBT youth will be hit hardest of all.

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