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## Anti-Racism, Healing and Community Activism

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**ABSTRACT:** The National Coalition Building Institute has developed effective models for combating racism and other forms of discrimination by combining methods of individual emotional healing with strategies for community activism. NCBI has built its effective anti-oppression work on two humanistic principles: (1) Care must be given to individuals to heal the past wounds that prevent them from taking effective grassroots leadership; and (2) grassroots political activism, rooted in a spirit of community-based cooperation and teamwork, brings about systemic institutional change.

The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), a nonprofit, international leadership training organization, grew out of Black-Jewish Dialogue work and has become a network of community- and organization-based chapters in the United States, Canada, England, and Switzerland. NCBI builds anti-racism coalitions and offers leadership training programs to a broad spectrum of constituents. NCBI has worked with hundreds of law enforcement agencies, government entities, educational institutions, trade unions, businesses, philanthropies, congregations, and voluntary community organizations (see, e.g., Horwitz, 1994; Njeri, 1993; Jackson, 1992). NCBI's principal office is in Washington, DC; and there are dozens of chapters and affiliates in communities throughout the United States,

Canada, England, and Switzerland. Over the last dozen years NCBI has developed models for doing effective anti-discrimination work in every imaginable setting—from public schools to police departments—by combining emotional healing work with skill-training in community activism. This essay sketches the history of NCBI and the humanistic principles that govern our work.

### NCBI's History

#### *Origins in Black-Jewish Dialogue*

NCBI grew out of a childhood commitment to build Black-Jewish coalitions. As a young girl from a working class Jewish family, I remember walking home from school in my predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Cleveland, OH, and passing an African American woman on the street. I was struck by the expression on her face. Although I had never met her before, she felt familiar to me. She had the same look of despair I had seen on the face of my father, who had lived in the shadow of the Holocaust (see also Smith, 1989). Within weeks of that chance encounter, I was organizing the Jewish youth group at my synagogue to sponsor a program with the local youth group of a Black church. I was ten at the time.

My family moved to Los Angeles in the summer of 1965, the year that racism exploded into violence in many U.S. cities. I was stunned when iron grates of fear appeared on so many storefronts of businesses serving the Black community. At fifteen, I began to attend White-Black dialogues in Watts, where I met Lou Smith, the director of Operation Bootstrap. Together, Lou and I built a friendship that spanned age, gender, race, class, and religion. He came to the synagogue where I taught young Jewish children, and he spoke about what it meant to be a Black man in America. We led together a Passover Seder for Jewish leaders and friends of the Black Panthers.

When I came back home from Israel after my first trip there in 1969, I was deeply disturbed by the rising acceptance of a military solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I sat in Lou's office in Watts and wept as we shared our common dreams for non-violent solutions to our peoples' struggles.

I vowed to learn everything I could about how to build bridges across painful group divisions. I experimented. I made lots of mistakes. But eventually, I put together models for dialogue; and I practiced putting them into action wherever I could find an organization that was willing to let me work with them.

In the 1980's, with the assistance of the American Jewish Committee, I designed a two-year series of structured workshops for Black and Jewish college students on five U.S. campuses (Brown, 1987; for more recent thoughts on Black-Jewish work see Brown & Herring, 1994). In working with the students, I discovered that instead of the open hate and distance I had expected, I found Black and Jewish students were eager to reach out to one another. However, they lacked many of the essential skills that make inter-group bridge-building possible (see Brown, 1984).

In those early workshops, I watched carefully what activities enabled the students to come together, to break through their bigoted attitudes and then initiate cooperative projects on their campuses. I noticed two things. First, whenever a Black or Jewish student told a specific story that described a painful experience with either racism or anti-Semitism, the grief shared by everyone in the room who heard the story bridged the differences in the group. Common tears built Black-Jewish alliances. The tears were a sign of healing. As the stories unfolded, the harsh realities of racism and anti-Semitism became more apparent. Following these personal stories of discrimination, the students showed an increased commitment toward activism.

Second, I learned that giving students hands-on, practical skills for interrupting racist and anti-Semitic behavior emboldened them to do something about the discrimination they witnessed. To move students beyond being sensitized but powerless, skill-training was necessary. Providing concrete ways to deal with day-to-day encounters with discrimination prompted many students to become activists on their college campuses.

Inspired by the insight of combining emotional healing work with activist training skills, I sought out an organizational base for putting these skills into practice. In my search for a place to lead this work, I found that there were sensitivity training institutes that understood the need for individual healing; but they did not have the focused commitment to anti-oppression work that I knew was necessary to change entrenched, institutional forms of discrimination. I also found numerous training centers for community organizers that had excellent skill-training sessions, but they lacked the understanding that individual healing work was not an escape from activism but essential for effective leadership.

In the summer of 1984, I launched NCBI as a leadership training organization that could train thousands of activists worldwide in the necessary skills of prejudice reduction, inter-group conflict resolution, and coalition building. I was determined to build a unique organization that would combine the social justice commitments of my activist days with an

organization that modeled in theory and practice the need for treating each human being as a precious individual who needed time to heal the scars from past mistreatment (see Brown, 1992).

#### *Evolution of NCBI Chapters and Affiliates*

In the first NCBI training Institutes, I learned that teaching participants a simple one-day workshop model, one they could return to their communities and replicate, enabled them to break through their own sense of powerlessness. After only a three-day training session, many participants would go back home and begin to lead prejudice reduction workshops. The NCBI Model consisted of a carefully integrated series of incremental activities that guided participants in a process of self-discovery and healing related to racism and other forms of oppression (Brown & Mazza, 1991). The program included understanding the pain inherent in acquiring misinformation about other groups, the role of internalized oppression in keeping groups divided, the power of personal storytelling to communicate information and shift attitudes, and the ability to change prejudicial behavior through practical skill-training. Soon, these new trainers were offering hundreds of NCBI workshops on college campuses and within various organizations throughout the U.S.

This was just the beginning. NCBI's Prejudice Reduction Model provided—and still provides—a powerful orientation to the complex dynamics that keep prejudices in place. The workshop was upbeat. People were welcomed to go at their own pace without the usual blame so often associated with anti-racism work. But, a one-day workshop can only provide the starting point for the vital institutional work that needs to be done. I observed that the one-day program planted seeds of hope; at times it replaced years of despair with a new vision for the possibility of ending oppression; and it offered much needed interpersonal skills for effective inter-group dialogue. But we needed a focused, sustained effort to dismantle entrenched, institutional racism.

In 1985, Professor Robert Corley, a community leader in Birmingham, AL, approached me after one of the NCBI anti-racism training programs in his community. He explained that given Birmingham's painful racial history, community leaders were acutely aware of the need to be vigilant in addressing racial issues honestly in their city. He recognized the power of NCBI programs, but he wanted more than a series of one-day workshops to which he could occasionally invite community leaders. He wanted an institutional, city-wide response to ending racism that would incorporate

the powerful emotional healing work he had witnessed during NCBI sessions.

After listening to Bob's concerns, I proposed that we launch an experimental project and build a leadership team in Birmingham based on NCBI methodology. The local team could then respond effectively to discrimination in the community whenever it occurred. So began the first NCBI chapter. We recruited and trained a group of local community activists to lead the NCBI workshops. We instituted monthly support meetings for the team and trained Bob to run the meetings. Each team meeting consisted of healing sessions for team members, practice in leading the model, and strategy sessions on how to get the work out into the community.

Emotional healing work in NCBI is built on the insights and methods of peer counseling as developed by Re-evaluation Counseling. With respectful group attention, individuals take turns being counselor and client. The counselor listens, draws the client out, and assists the client with emotional healing. Individuals are encouraged to reclaim natural healing processes, which have often been suppressed through socialization. These processes may include crying, trembling, sweating, laughing, and yawning. When adequate emotional healing can take place, the person becomes free of rigid patterns of behavior based on past hurts. As a result of the healing process, the person tends to see the world afresh and reclaims the innate ability to take charge of any situation and work against injustice (see, e.g., Kauffman, 1995).

Anti-discrimination initiatives often begin with great enthusiasm. But once confronted with the enormity of the challenge, the initial enthusiasm wanes. There can be resistance on all sides. Some resistance may come in the form of vocal opposition; other resistance may come in the form of polite subterfuge; but most common of all, resistance takes the form of powerlessness and discouragement. Progress may not seem fast enough. A few people acting in isolation can easily give up. We soon learned that creating a support team was the necessary antidote to discouragement.

Following the successful experiment in Birmingham, we began to build similar leadership resource teams everywhere. In cities, on college campuses across North America, and eventually in many national organizations, we recruited grassroots groups of 40-60 local-based leaders and taught them how to lead NCBI prejudice reduction models. Each team held monthly meetings where participants learned how to become effective allies for one another (see Mazza, 1990). Team members were leading prejudice reduction work in their respective communities, often battling

racism on the front lines; while at the same time, they were developing life-long personal relationships across group lines with the other members of their local teams.

NCBI instituted a parallel national and international effort to support the work of these teams. The director of each team became a member of an overall NCBI leadership coalition which met twice a year for further reinforcement, individual healing time, new program ideas, and joyous celebration. In these semi-annual NCBI leadership retreats, we tried out new approaches for improving the political impact of NCBI's work. Local NCBI leaders took the successful attempts back home and implemented them with their home teams.

In response to the growth of chapters, we developed a small national staff who became responsible for thinking about the training needs of the local leaders, offering monthly telephone support for every local team leader and conducting periodic chapter development sessions in each city to re-energize local efforts.

Local teams benefitted by being connected to other local teams who were involved in the same work and using the same methodology. For example, one chapter that was trying to launch work with law enforcement agencies could turn to another chapter in a different city for guidance based on that chapter's success in leading NCBI training programs for local police and fire departments. Our chapter in Portland, Maine, experimented by using the NCBI model with very young children. Inspired by this work, many of our chapters soon had programs taking place in elementary schools.

In the last three years, with a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, NCBI focused on finding new ways to strengthen local chapters and to increase their effectiveness in leading anti-racism work in their communities. Through a new program, the Leadership for Diversity Initiative, NCBI poured additional support, training, and supervision into four pilot U.S. cities: Allentown, PA; Birmingham, AL; Raleigh/Durham, NC; and Washington, DC. We wanted to embolden our teams to take on greater institutional-change initiatives and not just settle for leading successful one-day workshops in their cities. In one of these pilot cities, Durham, NC, community leaders asked the NCBI team to take charge of the staff training needs for the whole school system when an impending city-county school merger, mandated by the courts, unleashed enormous race and class divisions in the region.

In just 11 years, NCBI has launched 50 city-based chapters; 30 college campus affiliates; and 15 organizational affiliates.

### *Constituency Work*

Alongside the work of developing organizational affiliates and chapters, NCBI also worked to foster the development of a parallel constituency group network within the organization. A constituency group is a caucus based on a shared heritage. Particular constituency groups may be defined by race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, age, or culture.

Many multi-cultural organizations have adopted the goal of creating a diverse membership but are nonetheless threatened by sub-group work. Some may view constituency groups as divisive, undermining the cohesiveness of the larger organization. However, in NCBI, we have learned the power of organizing constituency groups. We particularly wanted to launch constituency group work within NCBI among those segments of the population that historically get left out of the leadership of inter-group coalitions. Many such groups must battle so much oppression from within the ranks of an organization just to stay involved. After a while, discouraged and exhausted, they simply drop out. Recruitment efforts directed toward achieving a multi-cultural organization often end with a White, middle-class leadership. We wanted something different.

NCBI's constituency work began in earnest seven years ago with the first weekend retreat for NCBI leaders of African heritage. Since then, under the leadership of NCBI Chief Operating Director Alvin Herring, Black NCBI leaders gather together every year for a three-day retreat. The retreats provide a powerful opportunity for NCBI Black leaders to find their way home to one another, to break through the loneliness and isolation of racism. The weekends include recalling and healing the earliest memories of racism; exploring the devastating effects of internalized racism; building allies across all the group divisions within the Black community; and celebrating the beauty of African cultures with art, music, dance, drumming, poetry, and prayers.

Following these annual African heritage retreats, the participants are encouraged to return to their NCBI home teams, renewed and strengthened by these family bonds with each other, to claim their places in the center of NCBI's work. In addition, the senior leaders of the African heritage constituency are also encouraged to replicate similar African heritage retreats within their local teams, spreading the power of the constituency work in their communities.

The African heritage retreat and the attendant constituency work with NCBI African heritage leaders has become the model for all of the other

NCBI constituency programs. In addition to African heritage, NCBI has organized the following constituency groups: Asian, Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual, Jewish, Latino, and Deaf Culture. Using the NCBI slogan, "All for One; One for All," each new NCBI constituency group cheers the others on, knowing that there is no inherent conflict between having a strong base of support within one's own group and being fully committed to the overall objectives of the larger organization.

#### *Movement toward Activism*

A number of events in 1995 and 1996 galvanized the NCBI national leadership to examine more closely how we could increase the activism of our community-based teams. Reactions to the O.J. Simpson verdict, the rash of church burnings in the U.S. South, and the attacks on immigrants and welfare recipients, all indicated a reemergence of unhealed race and class divisions. We held an NCBI leadership summit in January of 1996, bringing together twenty-eight senior NCBI team leaders to strategize on how to use NCBI healing methodologies to increase political activism. Out of this summit grew a plan to broaden NCBI's mission, shifting NCBI's focus from an organization of trainers committed to leading prejudice reduction workshops to an organization of activists committed to taking on the toughest social and political issues, including the ending of classism. In typical NCBI style, building on the successes that many chapters had already achieved, we introduced a new one-day workshop on political activism at our next semi-annual leaders meeting in April of 1996. With feedback from local chapter directors, we encouraged all of our team leaders to take this new thrust toward political activism back into their chapters.

One chapter that responded immediately to the challenge was the East Tennessee Chapter of NCBI in Knoxville, TN. Following the burning of an African American church in Knoxville, the NCBI Chapter Director, Asherah Cinnamon, promptly contacted the church and then wrote a statement of support for the Black congregation. She quickly organized community-wide endorsements of the statement from prominent religious and community groups. With the support of local organizations, NCBI's voice became the voice of the community. The statement in part read as follows:

We cannot agree that our community is to be defined by the most hateful or most disturbed elements within it, but wish to be defined as people who want to live together in peace, friendship, and justice... We commit ourselves even more strongly to the eradication of prejudice and injustice in our community and to facing in

ourselves the effects of the racism in our culture. ("NCBI Issues," 1996)

The public statement was just the beginning. The NCBI team joined an anti-racism coalition with local religious leaders, the NAACP, and the FBI; and the team led healing sessions throughout the city. As word spread of the work in Knoxville, NCBI teams in Austin, TX; Monterey, CA; Caldwell, ID; Dallas, TX; and Washington, DC—to name but a few—developed their own community-based responses to the church burnings, integrating an activist approach with the use of the NCBI healing methodology.

#### **Humanistic Principles in NCBI: Healing into Action**

In addition to the humanistic principles that have fostered NCBI's founding and growth, there are three principles that encourage individuals toward social action: (1) tending to the work of individual healing; (2) handling leadership attacks, and (3) cultivating a spirit of joy.

#### *Tending to Individual Healing*

Every important social change movement has relied on the initiative of individual leadership. Individuals bring about change. Every effective leader had to decide at some point that the need for change was so urgent, that there was no time to wait for someone more powerful to do it. Yitzhak Rabin defied all the fears of his people and decided it was the right moment to shake hands with Yasser Arafat.

The decision to take leadership is an individual act, often made while battling the shrillest internal voices of self-doubt. These negative interior voices tend to rehearse stinging criticisms from an earlier time. They draw their strength from the very sources of internalized oppression one is trying to overcome. Their admonitions have a familiar ring: They caution, "Who do you think you are?" or "Why should anyone listen to you?" or "You'll never succeed anyway!"

These are the voices of oppression and they keep leaders from leading. They are powerful enough when they emerge from within us. But they gather even greater strength when they are echoed in leadership attacks coming from without. To keep individual leaders leading, NCBI offers them a systematic way in team meetings to heal the places they are most vulnerable to believing that they are powerless or insignificant. Otherwise, leaders can easily lose sight of their present power, confusing painful past experiences with present reality.

For example, one of our chapter directors did not believe she was the right person to lead her chapter. She preferred behind-the-scenes leadership. After she revealed with much grief that her mother used to slap her whenever she tried to assert leadership within the family as a young girl, the chapter leader was able to see the present as a completely new moment. She proceeded to lead the chapter with increased power and vision.

Every NCBI team meeting provides some time for individual team members to heal what may be getting in the way of their taking bolder leadership.

#### *Handling Leadership Attacks*

Many critical social change efforts are now failing because of internal and external attacks on the leadership of those efforts (Brown, 1996). To challenge this growing anti-leadership phenomenon, NCBI has launched in recent years a program that we have entitled Ending Leadership Oppression. We have concluded that training people how to cherish and support leaders is now as critical as the work we do to eliminate racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. The targeting of leaders, the blaming of individual leaders for complex social problems, the pedestaling of leaders and then trashing them when their programs are no longer in vogue, all lead to a climate where no one wants to take leadership. The assumption that leaders are somehow less than human, people who no longer deserve basic support and care, holds back many social change efforts. To thwart this widespread anti-leadership bias, we have developed specific programs in NCBI in which every trained NCBI leader learns how to solicit appreciation and support for taking leadership and how to stand up against attacks and criticism. To remain in good standing on a NCBI team, every team member must back the team leader and learn how to offer suggestions for change in a spirit of cooperation.

In all of our NCBI teams, we practice a model for leadership development called self-estimation. The self-estimation process has three steps. The first step is for the leader and the team to notice how well the team leader is leading. Team members describe in as much detail as possible all of the specific ways in which the leader is excelling. Next, remembering that the leader at all times is doing the best she can, team members offer suggestions for improvement. The leader then has an opportunity to heal whatever difficulties from the past that contribute to any present leadership struggles. Finally, chapter members commit themselves to being an ally to the leader, offering specific ways that will help the leader lead better. The

goal is never to leave a leader abandoned, forcing her to respond in isolation to suggested improvements.

#### *Cultivating Joy*

For 12 years now, all of NCBI's work has been rooted in a humanistic commitment to integrate joy and celebration into our anti-discrimination work. Singing and games are part of every NCBI program. Oppression is serious, but getting rid of it does not have to be. We have introduced culture-sharing at all of our leadership training institutes, a time set aside for people to share with pride the stories and heritages of their peoples. During workshops we have introduced raucous games at break times to get people of all ages and backgrounds laughing and playing together. Finally, we have tried to model in all our work the ultimate humanistic principle: the greatest weapon to carry into battles against oppression is a light heart, full of compassion, generosity, courage, and love.

#### **Conclusion**

The humanistic principles that have governed NCBI's work against various forms of oppression can be expressed in two axioms. (1) Care must be given to individuals so they may heal the past wounds that prevent them from taking effective grassroots leadership. (2) Grassroots political activism, rooted in a spirit of community-based cooperation and teamwork, brings about systemic institutional change.

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Ms. Brown is the founder and Executive Director of NCBI. She wishes to acknowledge that even though portions of this article are written in the first person, it is the result of a joint, collaborative effort with NCBI Associate George J. Mazza. Correspondence should be addressed to: Cherie R. Brown, National Coalition Building Institute, 1835 K Street, NW, Suite 715, Washington, DC 20006.