



Healing From Racism

Cross-Cultural Leadership Teachings for the Multicultural Future

ADAPTED FROM A TALK

BY LILLIAN ROYBAL ROSE

Lillian Roybal Rose's cross-cultural awareness seminars have introduced people around the country to multicultural issues in an intimate, humanistic way. They've done this by introducing people to each other.

Schools, corporations, municipal governments and many other institutions have experienced the multi-day Lillian Roybal Rose workshops. These training sessions teach what it is to be a fully functioning human being by mixing lectures and discussions, one-on-one interpersonal work, culture and peer group sessions, and talking circles in which the whole seminar participates.

Lillian Roybal Rose was born in East Los Angeles, the child of political activists. Her father was elected to the Los Angeles City Council in 1949 and became the first Latino in the history of California to hold that post. He went on to serve for 13 years in L.A. government, following that with a tenure of 30 years in the U.S. Congress. Roybal Rose entered the struggle for Latino rights herself, first as a student, and then as an adult in the 1960s. "I identify myself as a Chicana," she says. "I am Mexican-American, but we are Mestizos. Mestizos means that we are part Indian. And we are proud of our indigenous roots." Her presentation to the 1994 American Indian Science

and Engineering Society (AISES) National Annual Conference drew on more than 25 years of experience as an educator, spanning the spectrum from elementary school to college teaching, to the current multicultural awareness seminars.

By the late 1960s Roybal Rose was married and in graduate school. Growing up in an activist family and fighting for her people's rights had taken its toll on the young Latina. Finding herself full of rage due to years of living with her people's struggle, she was ready to experience a gentler side of life. She was ready for a change. Remembering those times, she says, "In 1971 I had my first child. Something happens when you have your first child—at least it did for me. You want something to be softer, to be better. You start to explore and take risks for your child that you couldn't even figure out how to take for yourself."

One of those risks was to leave L.A. and the Chicano struggle. Or so she thought. Lillian Roybal Rose went on to study, and then to teach, how internalized oppression and internalized rage continue to affect people of color even after some outward forms of racism cease. Winds of Change is honored to present Ms. Roybal Rose's AISES '94 talk:

Soon after the birth of my second child I began to realize that weeks and months would go by in which I couldn't bear to look at the sunset. I could not bring myself to look at the ocean views from my home in Santa Cruz, California. I was angry, I was restless and I was filled with pain. I often made my way down the mountain with any excuse to find an L.A. Times. I would search the articles for mention of streets that were familiar or the names of people who I knew were still out there on those front lines of activism. I was filled with a tremendous amount of pain and grief and guilt for having left my people's struggle. It finally became very clear to me: you cannot run from who you are, you cannot run from where you come from, you must put language to your experience, and you must resolve your pain. That was about 19 years ago. I started to read everything that I could read, to go to every workshop that I could go to in order to make sense of the grief I was feeling in the depths of my soul. I was so into my own pain that I really did believe that what I was experiencing was unique to me, the child of political activists. I really had not understood at the time that what I was experiencing was much more universal.

One of the things that I saw all of my life—from the '40s to the '90s—was that it didn't matter if we were fighting against police brutality, for fair housing, against the freeway system, or for public health access for the people in our community. Regardless of what we were fighting for, I saw that when good people got together to fight an injustice and to implement change, invariably the energy that we had to fight that injustice, to implement that change, would turn inward and pretty soon we were all fighting each other. Latinos fighting other Latinos, Latinos fighting other people of color, people of color fighting potential white allies. It was always a tremendous source of pain and confusion to me as I saw this happen over and over again. It happened due to the racism that soared outside the door, and through the rage within, with which we injured each other. That was what was

hard to get over. It oftentimes felt that the only way to survive was to slowly, slowly move away—never consciously—but always finding ways to move away from the group. Because it's only the group that can say, "you're not Chicano enough, you're not Indian enough, you're not black enough. You're not committed enough." Always having to live up to that test is exhausting.

Understanding Internalized Oppression

As part of my search I came across the works of Paulo Freire, who started to give me language for the behavior of oppressed groups. Then I came across a workshop by the late Dr. Erica Sherover-Marcuse, who started to teach me the theory of internalized oppression. I remember the day that I went to her workshop. I'd seen a flyer on a telephone pole. Her picture was on the flyer. She's the one who coined the term, "unlearning racism." I could see by the picture that she looked like a white woman. I remember thinking to myself, "What's this white woman going to teach me about racism?" But I was intrigued. I decided to go to the workshop but I went with an attitude of posturing and pretense—I knew nothing else. It was part of my protection; it was part of my survival; it was that hard core: "Show me. I'm used to scaring you. Show me." I sat in the back of the room, arms folded, waiting for her to make one mistake so I could let her know how much she didn't know about racism, and how much I did. But by the end of the workshop, I was absolutely sobbing.

Not only did she not let my posture scare her, but she was able to push through that posture, through that pretense, and touch me in my very soul. She had language for things I had no language for. By the end of the workshop I was sobbing. She had theories to explain things that I had no explanations for. But I couldn't retain it. I went home and I said to my husband, "I think that I have started to learn something that's going to change my life." He said, "What is it?" I said, "I don't know." I had to go back several times in order to retain the information,

because I couldn't get through the sobbing every time I went to hear her. I learned the difference between rage and outrage. Outrage is anger and is a good emotion. As human beings, we are built with emotions. Outrage is a healthy response to injustice. It's perfectly fine for us to have outrage. Rage is the one that is self-destructive, and the one that we stuff. It comes from being powerless. It comes from injustice. It comes from imbalances of power that never let us attain equilibrium. Because of this imbalance, fighting for justice oftentimes meant literally risking our lives.

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It meant lynchings. It meant shootings. It meant killing. So, in order to survive, you stuff it. And you stuff it, and you stuff it.

Erica Sherover-Marcuse taught me that when there's an imbalance of power, rage can only vent in two places: against ourselves, and against members of our own group. It can't vent up into those who hold power. Think of a child. If a father comes home and beats the holy heck out of the child, what can the child do? The child can't fight it. That's another beating. But the child has to vent. Think of the child who is

turned off to learning, the child who is on drugs-that's self-destruction. Or the rage is turned on the child's own group. This is what is called internalized oppression.

Remember the lunchtime recess? We're all survivors of lunch. Remember if you were too tall or too short, particularly if you were male and short. Remember if you were too fat or too skinny. What if you had pimples, or your mother dressed you funny? Whatever it is, you're going to see the child vent out against other children. Because of the imbalance of power it's the only place you can vent.

But let's look at the way oppression works. We grownups see this phenomenon and we say, "Children are so cruel. Children are so mean." I'm suggesting to you that children are not cruel, that children are not mean. Children are venting in the only two safe places that society allows them to when there is an imbalance of power-against themselves and against members of their own group.

In order to understand the phenomenon of internalized oppression, it's important to assume that the essence of the human being-the spiritual part of the human being-is always good, is always intelligent. Behavior is separate from the essence of the human being. If we understand that phenomenon, then we can understand members of our own group and the way we hurt each other and ourselves. We hurt ourselves through alcoholism, suicide and other forms of self destruction. But how do we hurt each other? How does that manifest? Gangs are one example. We kill our own. Latinos killing other Latinos, blacks killing other blacks, Native people killing other Native people. That's classic internalized oppression.

Measuring each other's authenticity is a subtle way we hurt each other in the group. "You're not Indian enough, you're not Chicano enough. You're not black enough." If I believe that, then I'm going to have to become super Chicana. I'm going to have to compete with you, to be more "cultural" than

you, to speak Spanish a little bit better than you... When you have pretense you can never be authentic. And if you're not authentic, you're not genuine, you cannot have intimacy. I want to be very clear to you when I say the word "intimacy," because it's often misunderstood. What I mean by intimacy is the ability of one human being to relate on a very personal level to another human being, without pretense and without posturing. And I'm not speaking of sexual here. You can be sexual and never be intimate. And you can be intimate and never be sexual.

Now, without intimacy we cannot have systemic and lasting change, because we must have trust in order to have change. And trust requires intimacy. If I have to pretend, if I cannot be who I am, if I have to apologize, if I have to do all of those things in order to belong, I cannot really trust. Lacking intimacy, we oftentimes brutalize each other in the group. That's internalized oppression. It isn't about us being oppressors. It is not institutionalized oppression itself. It is the result of oppression, which is a very different phenomenon.

I can give you another example of internalized oppression that plays out in oppressed groups. It is something that we don't talk about, and that is internalized racism. It is true that amongst Latinos, as well as in other groups of people of color, we do discriminate against members of our own group, based on color. In Spanish you often hear, *tan Blanca, y tan bonita*. "So light and so beautiful." If you want to insult someone you say, *tu prieto feo*. "You dark, ugly one." That is internalized racism. That is not racism. It is the result of racism. It's important to understand the difference. If you understand, you'll come from compassion and caring; otherwise, you'll come from blame. "Look what we do to each other," you'll say. "What can we expect from others?"

Letting Go of the Rage

Part of the healing for me as a person of color happened when I was able to go back into those memories that created the rage

and finally deal with the feelings that I had internalized.

In 1979 I got very sick. I went all over the state to get a diagnosis for my illness. I got more and more sick and less able to get out of bed. No one could accurately diagnose me. Alternative medicine was out of my frame of reference.

Out of sheer desperation, I went to an acupuncturist. By this time I was so armored, so angry about things, that I was not letting anybody get close to me and therefore hadn't told this woman my story. As she examined me, she explained that you have several pulses in your wrist, and healers can hear the different organs of your body from the pulses; and all those organs are directly connected to emotions.

She put me on the table and was stroking my forehead, listening to my pulses, and she very softly said to me, "My darling girl, you've got to let go of the rage, because it's killing you." At this point, I had never connected the rage to my health.

For weeks afterward, I cried and cried. I would go into a market to shop, and all of a sudden a feeling would come over me and I would start to sob in the store. I told the acupuncturist, "I'm out of control!" But she said, "No, my darling, you are finally in control. You are finally letting it go. Your body is finally saying to you that you can't hold it in any more because you will die." I said, "How did you know? I never told you my story. You knew nothing about my background. How did you know?" She said, "I heard it in your liver."

Anger and resentment are held in the liver. People of color die of liver disease at a rate which is twice that of the dominant culture. I don't think that's a coincidence. I think it has to do with all of the rage we hold in from the injustice.

It finally became very clear to me that part of the delusion of oppression is that if I hold onto the rage, I am staying with the cause. Your mind begins to feel that the

anger itself is part of the struggle, that if you let go of the rage, you're letting go of the struggle. That is the delusion of oppression, because in the rage we continue to self-destruct-we drink ourselves, drug ourselves, or we work ourselves to death-or any variation of the above.

Shifting Frames of Reference

There's one ability that's crucial in dealing with internalized oppression: being able to shift one's frame of reference. This is crucial, because how you see a situation, and how you enter into it, makes all the difference in the world in the sense of power you have in dealing with it.

Let me give an example of a shift in frame of reference within the educational system. A teacher may view a student with learning disabilities from the frame of reference of the student's disability-or may shift position and approach the situation from the perspective of teaching disability. In this case the teacher accepts the challenge to figure out how the student learns best, as opposed to deciding that the student has an inability to learn. This classic shift in frame of reference empowers both the student and the teacher, because now there is room for each to learn.

I'm going to ask you to make a shift in your frame of reference. I want you to think of culture differently from how it is traditionally defined. Let's call culture anything that is benign or spiritual or connected. And let's call anything that demeans and devalues human beings oppression. Let's separate the two. Because if we don't, then in order to not be oppressed it begins to feel, for many of us, that we have to lose our culture. Let's see how this works for sexism.

When we see aspects of sexism in the dominant culture, it is usually called sexism, not culture. But when aspects of oppression run within non-dominant groups it is most often called "culture." And when we, as people of color, buy the definition, it begins to feel that if we resist oppression then we must give

up a part of who we are. We should never have to make that choice.

Let's assume that everything about your Indian culture is beautiful. There may be aspects of oppression that run through it, but you can throw the oppression out and love the culture, and in no way be diluted. It is difficult, because oppression becomes so familiar it starts to intertwine itself within the culture. Oftentimes it begins to feel like it is the same thing. The process of being able to separate what is oppressive from what is true and real culture is very painful. Sometimes it feels like you have to throw it all out in order to take back what is sound. And when you're in the process of trying to figure it out, sometimes it feels like you're losing an old friend-sometimes it feels like a part of you is dying.

As people of color, we need to be able to get connected to our feelings in order to heal. We need to separate culture from oppression, to stop behaving in ways that hurt each other, and to heal from racism. Racism is an injury. It hurts us. It mangles us. And without healing, we then play it out in our own group.

Resources

Following is a short list of resources recommended by Lillian Roybal Rose on the subject of "Healing from Racism".

Internalized Racism, by Suzanne Lipsky, 1987
Rational Island Publishers • P.O. Box 2081 • Main Office Station • Seattle, WA 98111

A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and the Threat of War, by Sissela Bok, 1989
New York: Vintage Books

Constructivist Listening for Empowerment and Change, by Julian Weissglass, 1990
The Educational Forum, Vol. 54, No.4, Summer 1990

The Human Side of Human Beings, Second revised Edition, by Harvey Jackins, 1978
Rational Island Publishers • P.O. Box 2081 • Main Office Station • Seattle, WA 98111,

Pamphlets on Empowering Parents and Children, In English and in Spanish
The Parents Leadership Institute • P.O. Box 50492 • Palo Alto, CA 94303 • (415)424-8687

During most of my life as an activist, I felt that if oppressed people could just get the power, things would get better. Shifting the power, flipping the power, is not really changing things systemically. What it does is reenact dehumanization. One of the most powerful things we can do to heal from racism is to let go of the rage and reach for the intimacy. That also means loving the dominant culture. This is hard to do, because we are so angry-but it is a powerful place to be.

Finding the Creative Alternative

How do we get there? We must find creative alternatives. How do we come up with the fresh, new, creative alternative, the one that doesn't have us reenacting our own dehumanization? We have to go back to the feelings; we have to go back to the intimacy.

Again, intimacy is the ability to relate to another person with authenticity and genuineness, without pretense, without posturing. If there's intimacy, we can make politically incorrect mistakes. If there's intimacy, when you make that mistake-and you will-or when I make that mistake-and I will-it will determine if we blow each other out of the water for it, or if we hang in there as allies trying to reach understanding, and working toward a common good.

I want to leave you with one thought. On the other side of your pain, on the other side of your grief, on the other side of your rage, on the other side of your exhaustion, lies the creative alternative. And it will be healing, it will be spiritual, it will be humane, and it will be right. It will change the system deep in its roots. The system will go back to the earth, it will go back to the spirits-and it will be lasting.

Lillian Roybal Rose conducts cross-cultural awareness workshops and lives in southern California. For more information regarding her seminars, contact: Lillian Roybal Rose • P.O. Box 4100 • Santa Cruz, CA 95063 • (831)423-7678