

# Introduction

## The Soul of Democracy

There are moments in history when there are major breakthroughs in the power of social movements. Large numbers of people recognize the depth of injustice, see possibilities of beauty and integrity heretofore unknown, and find new forms of coming together to bring about change. We are living in such a time.

We also live in a time of genuine threat—rising authoritarianism, racism, and xenophobia, increasing environmental degradation, morally unconscionable income and wealth disparities, a dangerously militarized police force, and a criminal justice system that disproportionately targets people who are African American, Native American, and Latinx. Moreover, we are confronting ongoing threats of war and terrorism, escalating Islamophobia, and a national political system that is largely ineffective, paralyzed by increasingly high levels of division and polarization.

We are in a struggle for the very soul of democracy, and all that we hold dear—interdependence, reason, compassion, respect for all human beings, and stewardship of the natural world that sustains us—is under direct, unabashed assault. The words of the sociologist and writer Michael Eric Dyson in *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* are telling: “We have, in the span of a few years, elected the nation’s first black president and placed in the Oval Office the scariest racial demagogue in a generation. . . . The remarkable progress we seemed to make with the former has brought out the peril of the latter.”<sup>1</sup>

This book is meant for those who are concerned about dangers to our democracy, and to our social health as a nation. It is for those who desire to work for social justice, and to respond to essential protests by enacting progressive change. In this book, we will take up three essential challenges. First, we will confront head on why expansive social change has been followed by increases in violence and authoritarianism. Second, we will examine how we as a nation might more fully acknowledge the brutal costs of racism and the historical drivers of racial injustice. And, third, once aware of these dynamics, we will examine how people of all races can take up our roles in containing such violence in the present and preventing its resurgence in the future. This book focuses directly on the ethical challenges faced by those people who have a measure of social and economic power—those who have found themselves in positions to shape political, economic, and educational policies and practices. We can use our power responsibly and collaboratively to work for a genuinely inclusive democracy. We can confront both the scope of white violence and the depth of our dependence upon Americans of all races for the very ideals of a democracy that fully expresses the values of liberty and justice for all.

First, let us address in more detail the scope and depth of the threat that we are facing at this juncture in history. Many people throughout the world were profoundly heartened by the election and then reelection of President Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012. Though there were media reports and musings by pundits and citizens about the inauguration of a “post-racial” society, the signs of ongoing racism were all too clear—the relentless Republican obstruction of his leadership and the explicitly racist and demeaning personal attacks on both him and on First Lady Michelle Obama. Many continued to point to the ongoing serious problems of structural

racism in our nation, as manifest in mass incarceration, educational and income inequality, and the debilitating social and political effects of implicit bias.

As political philosopher Iris Marion Young has argued, it seemed that we were in a time in history in which injustice was perpetuated primarily through systems rather than through systems and individual hatred and fear.<sup>2</sup> The explicit racism, sexism, and hatred of the Trump campaign in 2016 appeared to represent the death throes of white supremacy, not its possible birth pangs. I certainly did not expect to see the return of explicit racial hatred at a large scale—the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, of neo-Nazis, and of campaigns on college campuses nationwide for a white identity politics that explicitly advocates for white supremacy. Nor did I expect to see blatant denials of the scope and depth of the racist violence of the past.

Perversely, what eases my shock at the rise of authoritarianism and explicit racism is the realization that it did not rise in spite of the best efforts of all progressives to contain it. In fact, it is my contention that it rose for just the opposite reason. Many of us, as whites, did not work with our fellow African American, Latinx, Native American, and Asian American citizens to do what was needed to stop its resurgence now and to prevent its rise in the future.

In the face of these rising threats, my stance—and the motivating premise of this book—is not despair but awakening. It can be that bad again. There can be lynchings, hate crimes, and other forms of white violence against people of color. White activists who are committed to racial justice were not doing enough to stop the rise of explicit racism and hatred, and we can and must and will do more. While we decried the devastating impact of structural racism and implicit bias, many of us thought that there was a threshold below which we would not go. That we have gone below it is for many of us a challenge to our basic understandings of human nature, of the relationship between good and evil, and the multiple dimensions of social change.

There are tasks that we have not taken up that are essential in sustaining a fully inclusive and expansive democracy, and there are tasks that we have pursued, but not as completely, not with as much creativity and persistence as is necessary. This book offers insight on how to expand what we know works to create justice, and on how to enter into new areas of research and experimentation in an effort to contain the worst cruelty and folly of humankind.

Here is our challenge. How do we learn from what is going well how to respond, with courage, creativity, and persistence, to genuine threats and growing dangers? How do those who have achieved positions of institutional power—in corporations, on university campuses, within religious organizations, and beyond—take up the task of transforming those institutions' structures and practices to foster justice and equality? How do we challenge assaults on the fundamental rights of an informed and equal citizenry, and on the essential principles of checks and balances between the various branches of government? The first step is simple—looking with both a critical and an appreciative eye at the many manifestations of constructive civic engagement that grace our world. What are the ethical values, the tactics, and the strategies that enable people to live out their highest values? The second step is more difficult. How do we apply these lessons, how do we honor these constructive efforts, as we engage on the ground with challenges that are seemingly intractable?

In the pages that follow we will take up both tasks, exploring examples of constructive civic engagement and gleaning insights for models they may offer for our own work for social justice. We will also examine the ethical challenges of such work and evolving theories of what enables constructive social change.

Both the grave challenges and inspiring opportunities that confront us are equally real. In addition to rising threats of hatred and violence, we are also currently immersed in a constructive

wave of political engagement in which people throughout the world are working together to address basic issues of environmental risk and social inequality. This is a third wave of progressive political engagement that is increasingly influential, and it is only possible because of the ongoing power of the first two waves of progressive politics.

The first wave of progressive politics was the forceful denunciation of manifold forms of social injustice—slavery, the oppression of workers, and the secondary status of women—all systems of social control defended for millennia as divinely ordained or as part of the natural order of things. These struggles for social justice were augmented by a second wave of activism, the work of identity politics, the resolute claim for the complex identities and full humanity of people with disabilities; those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, and ethnic; and racial and religious minorities—all deprived of cultural respect and full political participation. Within these two ongoing waves of political activism, people are exposing and denouncing with power and courage the five forms of oppression identified by the political philosopher Iris Marion Young: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.<sup>3</sup>

I find it ironic that I began my career as an activist and academic as an outsider calling for social change—declaring that the nuclear arms race was a test of faith, seeing the political and ethical challenges of what many of us perceived as the increased likelihood of nuclear war and the possible end of all life on the planet.

Today, I am an insider. From my perspective inside academic halls of power, I see us as experiencing another test of faith. This time, it is not one of refusing to see danger. This time it is the inability to see real and rising danger, and to see as well equally real progress and profound opportunities. While the critical work of denouncing social injustice and striving for the full recognition of human rights for all peoples goes on, these tasks now occur within a third wave of pragmatic political activism. Once we recognize that a situation is unjust, once we know who should be included, how then do we work together to go about actually enacting change?

Like many activists, I know firsthand the appeal of speaking truth to power: the inspiration and sense of identity evoked by clarion denunciations of injustice and faithful witness to ideals of justice and peace. As first a director of women's studies, department chair, and then provost, I have confronted personally and collectively another reality—one as stark but more ambiguous—the painful discovery that to care passionately about injustice does not mean that we, the “revolutionary vanguard,” are equally skilled in the task of coordinating and managing human and natural resources justly, creatively, and in a way that lasts for the future. As we take up the task of using power truthfully, we recognize that the work is not done when the protests are heard. Rather it is here, it is now, that another, equally difficult type of work begins.

This book focuses on the enactment of progressive politics. How do we translate the recognition that a situation is unjust into tangible political change, creative forms of civic engagement, and more just social institutions? This book offers examples of the work for social justice that is being done on the ground in such arenas as criminal justice reform, environmental sustainability, and economic life. It explores the work of corporations that pay attention to social justice, not just profit, and of universities that engage with communities to solve shared social challenges. It offers concrete examples of how the work in enacting social change is being accomplished by insiders who have both the power and responsibility to enact fundamental institutional change. It showcases how various individuals, corporations, and other entities are embracing opportunities to transform institutional practices and structures to foster justice and equality. And it also addresses the ethical challenges and political responsibilities of those

managers and owners who are instituting such just economic practices.

This constructive work of responding to protests by implementing new policies and creating new social structures requires an ethic of risk. As we embrace the artistry of multiracial and cross-cultural partnership and leadership to enhance the common good, we know that unpredictable and unforeseen consequences are the norm. We must create cultures of honest accountability and generative critique, learning as much from our unpredictable mistakes as from our catalytic successes. This work extends, therefore, the argument that I made in *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*.<sup>4</sup> I wrote that book early in my career from the perspective of an outsider demanding social change. This book is written from the point of view of insiders who have both the power and the responsibility to respond to protests by enacting fundamental institutional change. Its goal is to help scholars, students, and activists who are focused on enhancing progressive social change, and who are in need of models for how to bring their desires for such change into reality. It illuminates a range of work already being enacted for social justice with the aim of helping readers to explore how they too can bring about, sustain, inspire, and support such work.

In order to fully live out the promise of constructive political and social change, it is important that we also fully acknowledge a fourth wave of catalytic social engagement. To engage in the other three waves of political engagement with genuine accountability and the utmost creativity requires that we see, name, and contain our constitutive and intrinsic forms of evil.

It is here that we have much to learn from the work of Carol Lee Sanchez. Sanchez is of Pueblo and Lebanese descent, raised in the Laguna Pueblo, and was an author, artist, and professor of American Indian studies. In her writing and in her teaching, Sanchez shared with us the fundamental insight that the indigenous respect for the natural order is not simply natural, and, in fact, is just the opposite. Reverence for the natural world is learned from hard-won lessons of what had gone wrong when there was a lack of respect for both the natural and the social order. Respect is maintained only through two ongoing social processes—telling the stories of environmental degradation and social inequity, and checking the tendencies to repeat those patterns through specific rituals. In her teaching and writing, Sanchez did not share with us the rituals that were used by the people of the Laguna Pueblo, but encouraged us to tell our own stories of disruption and to create our own rituals of respect and belonging, our own recognition of the necessity and power of the Beauty Way.<sup>5</sup>

We find the same wisdom offered by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer is a botanist and a member of the Potawatomi Nation. We will explore what she calls the “original instructions,” the challenge to shape our lives as individuals and as a society by seeing the responsibilities and gifts that come with our place in the natural order.<sup>6</sup> In addition, however, to seeing our gifts, and learning to use them in responsible ways, Kimmerer challenges us to see and check our constitutive evil. She tells the story of the Windigo, a person driven by greediness with a heart as cold as ice, only focused on his or her own needs. Once focused only on one’s own needs, the longing for more becomes both insatiable and ruthless, even leading one to experience pleasure in taking from others and causing pain to others.<sup>7</sup>

Kimmerer provides a compelling account of the way in which the Windigo shapes the lives of so many of us, not only indigenous peoples. She sees the Windigo at the core of rapacious globalization and exploitative and extractive capitalism. The wisdom here is pointed. We can see this greed and violence and contain it in others, and we must see it and contain it in ourselves:

Gratitude for all the earth has given us lends us courage to turn and face the Windigo that stalks us to refuse to participate in an economy that destroys the beloved earth to line the pockets of the greedy, to demand an economy that is aligned with life, not stacked against it. It's easy to write that, harder to do.<sup>8</sup>

While we can find antidotes to the Windigo, we cannot destroy the ongoing threat of isolation and insatiable greed. The Windigo remains as a recurring temptation that can lead us away from a respectful grounding in the social and natural plenitude that could sustain us.<sup>9</sup>

Now, here is the crucial lesson. What are our other forms of evil and injustice? For those of us who are white, what are the forms of evil that prevented us from seeing the humanity of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the humanity and dignity of the African people we so readily and cruelly enslaved, that led us to the exploitation of both the natural world and of the human resources of those people of all races who were seen primarily as labor to be used, rather than as fellow human beings to respect?

It is clear that we too, have been and are shaped by the Windigo spirit of greed and domination. Our task, then, is threefold—first, how do we honestly tell the histories of this exploitation? Second, how do we identify other forms of intrinsic evil that have shaped our collective lives and limited our moral imagination? Third, how can we learn to check all of our Windigos earlier rather than later?

Here is the challenge. I have not found the political science that demonstrates empirically the constitutive weaknesses of white liberals who are committed to constructive social change. What I have to offer are hypotheses for further research, and invite you to join me in this process. These are hypotheses based in my lifelong work as an activist, and will be explored in more detail in each of the following chapters.

The first danger is obvious—the consumerist Windigo. Although liberals and progressives are rightly critical of the social and environmental costs of extractive capitalism and exploitative consumerism, it takes ongoing effort to shape our lives by “belonging, rather than belongings.”<sup>10</sup>

A second moral danger is clear, and is demonstrated in the research on liberalism. We may be tempted to choose excessive forms of individualism, of isolated self-assertion, rather than finding our freedom and creativity in collaboration and mutual respect.

A third danger is manifest in much of our organizing and political activism. All too often progressive and liberal activists turn the strengths of successful nonviolent resistance movements into weaknesses. We defeat ourselves by fighting over strategies and tactics, rather than finding ways to create resonances between varied and multifaceted forms of political and communal engagement.

A fourth danger is remaining unaware of our own capacity for error and partiality. We can be morally pure but strategically inept, and when that happens we lose.

A fifth danger is our failure to take on the multiple expressions of racism and checking these in our personal, civic, and professional lives. We must confront both the ongoing dangers of implicit bias and structural racism as well as the resurgence of violent and virulent racism by white Americans against people who are African American, Latinx, Asian American, Muslim, and Native American. Both threats require deliberate and sustained attention, analysis, and activism.

A sixth danger, closely related to the fifth, is the utopian expectation of definitive revolutionary change, or linear and assured progress. We can become complacent about the

solidity of hard-fought social gains. When this happens, we fail to be vigilant guardians of an expansive democracy that genuinely embodies liberty and justice for all.

A seventh danger is just the opposite of the sixth. When total change is not possible, we can be discouraged from creatively working with partial successes. How do we avoid reforms that divert us from the work of expansive social justice? How do we use partial victories as the catalysts for more work for justice? How do we avoid both the complacency of mere reform and the illusion of definitive revolutionary change?

Let us return to the words of Michael Eric Dyson: *To replace racial demagoguery with expansive and inclusive democracy requires that we remain vigilant in our work for justice.* When we no longer expect linear assured progress or passively endure pendulum swings between authoritarianism and progressivism, we can become responsible makers of history, resolutely nurturing our best and creatively containing our worst.

Given the profound political and ethical challenges and opportunities of our time, this book is one of mourning, rage, and critique, and it is also one of profound gratitude for all those who are living for justice as citizens, activists, neighbors, parents, workers, managers, owners, and investors. The stories offered in this book provide examples of the critical work being done in an effort to create generative interdependence: a community that fully values diversity and connection, that nurtures creativity and scientific rigor, and that embodies responsibility for others and the freedom to find new and better ways of living out, and creating, expansive human communities of connection, respect, and cooperation.

In this book, we will explore the worlds of social enterprise, impact investing, and other attempts to create economic systems that are environmentally sound and economically just. We will study the way in which universities and colleges are educating students to be critical participants in creating a truly just and sustainable social order. In each of these instances, activists are working from positions of power within institutions to transform institutional practices and structures to foster justice and equality. Their work, “after the protests are heard,” aims at actually enacting social change once injustices are brought to light. These institutional insiders are living out a shift in honor codes—principles by which members of societies hold themselves and others in particular regard. They are responding to rallying cries against injustice by instituting changes in policy and practice, and in so doing are helping to foster a convergence of ideas within our society around right, just, and appropriate forms of constructive civic engagement.

At the core of democracy is respect for the rights of all, and, what is of equal importance, a recognition of the limits of all. We are all partial, fallible, and capable of the misuse or abuse of power to serve the needs of the few rather than the good of the many. We need checks and balances to address the possible misuse of power; we need multiple voices and perspectives to address the partiality of our knowledge and the mistakes in our reasoning.

In 2016, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein issued an updated version of their insightful and definitive 2012 analysis of the forces leading to the erosion of the democratic process in the United States. Our electoral system and our governing institutions are paralyzed by increasing polarization and division. In that book, and in the follow-up volume written with E. J. Dionne Jr., *One Nation after Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet-Deported*, they provide an essential guide to what it takes to “bring democracy to life.”<sup>11</sup> The tasks are multiple; the tasks are all of equal importance: ending gerrymandering and vote suppression, removing the dysfunctional role of money in politics, changing the Electoral College system, honoring our governmental system of checks and

Sharon D. Welch, *After the Protests Are Heard: Enacting Civic Engagement and Social Transformation* (NYU Press, 2019)

balances, and finding ways to deliberate across differences in service of the larger common good. All of these tasks are necessary “to reclaim the dignity of public life and the honor of democratic politics.”<sup>12</sup>

The unravelling of democracy has occurred over decades. It will take time and ongoing vigilance to restore an electoral system and processes of governance that fully embody generative interdependence. There are many places in our society where the soul of democracy is being expressed, and places where it is under fundamental assault. We can amplify the energy of the former and use it to transform and contain the latter.

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Note to the reader: This book incorporates a number of examples of professionals involved in institutional and social change. These vignettes were written by Lynda Sutherland, and are based on interviews, some conducted by Sutherland alone, and some by myself and Sutherland. Her contributions will be indicated each time with an endnote.

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- 1 Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 3.
  - 2 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, with a new introduction by Danielle S. Allen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 207–227, 41.
  - 3 *Ibid.*, chapter 2.
  - 4 Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990 and 2000).
  - 5 Carol Lee Sanchez, “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: The Sacred Connection,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993).
  - 6 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 7.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, 377.
  - 8 *Ibid.*
  - 9 *Ibid.*, 375.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, 308.
  - 11 Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Was: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism. New and Expanded Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); E. J. Dionne Jr., Thomas E. Mann, and Norman J. Ornstein, *One Nation after Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet-Deported* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).
  - 12 Dionne, Mann and Ornstein, *One Nation after Trump*, 288.