

Refusing to Accept the Unacceptable

Organizing with Humility and Love



By Anika Whitfield
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I was blessed to have parents who believed in public education and the importance of reading and reading comprehension. When I got to kindergarten, though, I learned that almost everyone in my class, except for me, had difficulties with reading or had not been privy to learn how to read yet. I enjoyed reading, and my teacher, Ms. Darlin, recognized that I had a gift. With the permission of my parents, she made me a peer facilitator. I found that to be invigorating because I saw how a lot of my classmates who didn't seem to be motivated by our teacher responded to me. My classmates seemed to grasp reading a lot faster when I was assisting them. That led me into what I consider to be my first experiences with organizing. At this very young age, I did not realize that this was organizing. I thought it was just hearing about people and being observant of my neighbors and loving others.



My first-grade teacher, Ms. Moore, recognized my gift as well. With her encouragement I found myself organizing my classmates on the playground. When we were playing hopscotch and Double Dutch, we used phonics to learn how to enunciate words, how to hear common words, and to spell words. Then we started doing it with numbers because I was also very good at math. I was able to help with timetables and addition and subtraction problems, again, using hopscotch and Double Dutch. A lot of my classmates gravitated towards spending time with me on the playground because they knew that along with having fun, we could learn together. It was just a beautiful thing.

This essay was produced in collaboration with the People's Think Tank (PTT). Researchers from PTT interviewed organizers (such as the author of this piece) and worked with them to create these essays. We believe that these essays offer important lessons for movement builders seeking to pursue intersectional organizing, connect communities and movements, build solidarity, and achieve education justice. The views expressed in these essays are the author's and not necessarily those of the People's Think Tank.

That became my foundation of organizing as early as I can remember: seeing something that I had a gift in and finding an opportunity to share it with the community; and finding ways to organically create the connections and relationships that make me stronger and sharper, and also help to make the community around me stronger and healthier and happier.

Through junior high school, high school, college, and medical school years, I found those same organizing tools to be so beneficial not only for myself but the community that I was with. That is what organizing is to me: building healthy relationships in community to help the community to be healthier.

Organizing in my Veins

I have organizing in my veins. My dad was part of the student movement in the 1960s, organizing with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He was a student at Arkansas AM&N in Pine Bluff, which is the oldest and largest HBCU (Historic Black Colleges and Universities) in our state. My dad led the Pine Bluff student movement. His youngest brother was a member of the Black Panther Party and helped to organize free breakfast programs in Kansas City.

My grandparents supported the civil rights movement as well. My grandfather was a carpenter, and he built homes or rooms on the side of people's homes to provide housing for some of the students who were not allowed to live in dorms or who went to schools that didn't have dorms; that was his way of contributing to the movement. My grandmother was an amazing cook. She would prepare delicious meals and take them to detention centers, jails, and prisons to make sure that people,

especially those who went in as activists and organizers, knew that they were loved. That was her contribution to the movement.

Growing from this heritage, there is a fire within me. It is very innate. It is very organic. It is just a part of who I am.

Confronting Inequities in Public Education

When I moved back home after becoming a podiatrist, I realized that a lot of people did not understand why they were unhealthy. Because they lacked a solid education, they had trouble understanding information. I realized that as a doctor, if what I'm trying to communicate is not being well understood, then I'm ineffective.

I took a year off to be a substitute teacher in the public school system. I thought maybe if I start helping people at an early age appreciate why decision-making, comprehension, reading, and mathematics are necessary in life that I can help create a powerful domino effect of people better



appreciating their health and their well-being.

I discovered public schools had so many broken places and spaces. I met so many students who felt like they were not able to learn. For them

school was a place almost of punishment where they were constantly reminded of what they could not do rather than inspired about what they could. I found a lot of teachers overwhelmed by feeling underappreciated, not seen, and not heard.

These teachers had some amazing creative ways of teaching like my Mrs. Darlin and Ms. Moore, but they were not allowed to be creative. I always valued teachers as being the highest thinkers, the greatest people in the world. I felt so humbled to be a substitute teacher, but I watched so many teachers not feel valued in their profession and not feel like they had a voice and had the right to use their creative skills and talents.

That's how my organizing came around to

Grassroots Arkansas. I wanted to help educators feel more confident about what they do and appreciate the importance of their gift, their craft, and their profession. I wanted to help students appreciate the blessing of being able to have the freedom of space to learn. I wanted to help parents value what I consider to be one of the greatest forms of reparations in America, especially for African Americans and Indigenous peoples. Education is something that we should hold strongly to and not allow anyone to steal from us, so that the reparations are not wasted.

Public education is one of the most precious gifts one could have. The opportunity to learn and grow and be a life learner also helps the community to be healthy and the city and state to be healthy too.

I started talking to people and asking, "What needs fixing and how can we fix it together?" I asked students, parents, and educators. I found

myself helping to organize all three groups to achieve the things that they felt were unachievable, things that people had grown apathetic about, things that people felt like were just the status quo and there was nothing they could do about it. I helped them to see that, in fact, there is something we can do about it, especially if we work together.

I started getting more and more calls from people saying, "Hey, I've got this problem. Can you help me fix it?" I was like, "Well, the key is in us fixing it together and not me fixing it for you. I'm not coming to save the day. I'm coming to help you think through what it is that you really want, how we can achieve that together, and who we need to pull together to do that."



To me, the failures of our public education system and the inequities in it are simply unacceptable. That's what led to Grassroots Arkansas, but it came from my faith as well.

Part of my calling as an ordained minister is to "go ye therefore and teach all nations." Part of

my challenge with my calling was to say to God, "How is it that people have this gift and understanding to preach but don't preach the liberating gospel, don't live and walk in the liberating truth?" If we say that everybody's life is important and that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, then how does that sit with our structures and our congregations where people who don't have are often regulated to a different place and space in the church?

I believe that I have been a liberating force in the faith community because I don't accept the unacceptable. I don't accept the rhetoric and the hypocrisy of love that looks like hate. I shine a light on it, and I say, "This isn't love." In some circles, I

become someone that people sometimes call rebellious or radical. To me, I am just truthful and honest and loving and unaccepting of the unacceptable.

Fighting for Local Control of Schools: False Evidence that Appears Real

Grassroots Arkansas first came together to defend the Little Rock School District from a state takeover. The district has a historic legacy as one of the first school districts where students organized to say that they deserved an equitable education. The Little Rock Nine made international news trying to enter and desegregate Little Rock Central High School.

In 2015, our public school district was taken over by the state, and we organized together to keep schools from shutting down. We went to the schools, and we asked, "What's going on with your school? Why would the state want to shut your school down?" We talked to parents, students, and administrators. We started peeling the onion and discovered that most of the reasons for closing schools were based on false narratives that people

were trying to make appear real. Fear is often that: false evidence that appears real.

One of the schools that they were trying to shut down, Franklin Elementary, was the school that I attended as a child. The Black community had built Franklin Elementary as a community school, serving students and their families with a holistic, caring approach, with teachers like Ms. Moore and Ms. Darlin who taught me.

The state said the school was underutilized. But when we peeled the onion, we discovered that over the past two or three years the school district had started reassigning students from that school to other schools. They were intentionally closing down classrooms, but that was not a part of the narrative that they were sharing with people.

The reason that the population in that school went down by 200 students was because the district itself moved 200 students out of the school. The district wanted to build up other schools and justified shutting the previous schools down with a narrative that families wanted to leave because teachers had failed to educate students



academically in the ways that they were supposed to.

They also failed to tell the community that this school was populated with more students who were unhoused than any other school, and with students who had a lot of medical problems, students who needed mental health supports, and families who needed those supports too. They failed to tell the public that holistic services were offered in that school because of community love and support. Instead, they were getting ready to shut that school down.

Grassroots Arkansas was able to help parents who valued the school share their stories at community meetings. One parent said, "My child is succeeding at this school, because these people care about her. Instead of suspending her when she was being disruptive in class, they discovered because of the clinic that's in the building that she had a gastrointestinal problem that was causing her to get agitated. They noticed that every day after lunch, she would be disruptive. It turns out that she was allergic to some substances in the food. Once they were able to change what she was eating, her behavior changed. Her focus improved tremendously, and she became student of the month. She became an ambassador of the school. In other words, she became very much like I had been in school, a tutor, a supporter, and an organizer in her classroom. She became an amazing leader.



We heard story after story of parents giving testimonies like this. Unfortunately, the community also got to see that no matter how many testimonies were given, cold-hearted political people still closed that school down.

There was a win in the story, however, in that we changed the public perception about failing schools. We learned that we can't wait until they've pulled the plug on us. We've got to be proactive. We've got to show up and stand up for our schools. We've got to ring the sirens and sound the alarms that we are worth fighting for. We are worth the battle. A lot of our parent organizers in Grassroots Arkansas came from that school. A lot of our community leaders and community organizers came from that community saying, "We don't want this to happen to anybody else."

As we grew stronger, Grassroots Arkansas helped parents and community members fight the state's takeover of Little Rock schools and return them to local control. We finally won that fight in 2021 and continue to put forward a vision of inclusive, equitable, and community-oriented public education.

Organizing Must Be Intersectional

How do you organize without being intersectional? It's almost impossible. There's very little we can do in life in isolation, on our own.

The more we appreciate that the issues we are organizing around are connected, the healthier we become. Then we don't see any less value in addressing one issue versus another, whether it's education, the environment, housing, or transportation; rather we see the essential coordination of how all of those things matter in people's lives, how all of those things are essential, and how all of those things help us to be healthy together.

Rather than focus in isolation on me and mine, we need to have more of an Ubuntu understanding, or "I see you, we see each other." We are

connected, not just physiologically but with a really deep spiritual, theological, and emotional connection. When you're hurting, I'm hurting. When you're suffering, I'm suffering. When you're happy, I'm happy. When you're doing well, I'm doing well. That kind of connection.

Solidarity is wonderful when we can do it. I have seen it happen in Grassroots Arkansas and also when I was the co-chair of the Arkansas [Poor People's Campaign](#) in 2017 and 2018. People who never met before were able to come together as if we had known each other for years, because we found the connections we had. There were so many commonalities of oppression, whether it was overcriminalization, under-housing, food apartheid, or environmental injustice. People who weren't directly affected recognized that experiencing any of these evils was horrible. They understood that people who recognize evil but don't do anything about it are also culpable.

There were beautiful movements when some folks said, "Hey, my family members did some horrible things to Indigenous people, but I'm here to break that chain. I'm here to be clear that I'm a person that loves. I'm here to be clear that I want to restore and heal and give back what was stolen from other people. I'm here to say that I can't repay or repair what has been broken, but I will do as much as I can to uplift and to support." Some people who have had family members who were part of the Ku Klux Klan came out and said, "Not me, not my generation. It stops here."

In making these connections, some of the most profound things are the simplest things, like opening yourself up to a conversation, being truthful to yourself, and presenting your true self to other people. Truth seeks truth; love begets love; and peace begets peace. When you come to somebody with truth, it's more likely, not always, but more likely that you can receive truth from someone else. The more you show up in truth and love, the more that's what you receive back.

We went to small towns and communities all over Arkansas, holding tent revival like meetings where we would invite people to learn about why we were organizing, why we were coming together, and why it's important to overcome systemic racism, as well as poverty, environmental injustice, economic injustices, overcriminalization, and voter suppression. We talked about how our state and our nation would be healthier if we did it together.

Solidarity: Building and Sustaining Relationships

Through this process, we built some amazing relationships, and we have sustained them. When anything that is anti-people or anti-environment comes up, many of our Poor People's Campaign family members show up. As a former co-chair, I'm still getting calls from people asking when we are going to organize and what we are going to do. It's invigorating to see that type of community ready for action.

At one point the Poor People's Campaign helped a group seeking to increase voter turnout. We learned that there are people in county detention centers that are eligible to vote but have no means of doing so because there's no system in place to ensure that they get their ballots. Even if they got an absentee ballot, they might not have a stamp to mail it. There's no system in place to make sure that their photo ID cards are getting copied and placed in those ballots so that their votes count.

We stepped in and helped create that process in a short period of time, so that fifteen people could vote. We had to drive to several counties because although the inmates were in a detention center in one county, they lived in another county. We had to go to their county to pick up their absentee ballots and to cast their votes.

Although the numbers were small, it was also a wonderful educational experience. We talk about intersectionality all the time. This process gave us a

chance to learn the laws and procedures to ensure that people are not denied their right to vote.

Refusing to Accept the Unacceptable

There are obstacles to this kind of solidarity: the false evidence that appears real creates fear and the false narratives that say it's impossible, that this world was supposed to be chaotic, and that we're not supposed to be in solidarity. Another false narrative says that people's differences are deficiencies, and that this world was created to have dominance by some and oppression of most. Unfortunately, people buy into theologies and philosophies that are basically defeatist. So the question becomes, "Are you willing to invest the time and energy to expose truth? Are you willing to show up in love? Are you willing to help unstop ears that have been stopped and uncover eyes that have been blinded? Are you willing to show up in a way that does not accept the unacceptable?"

It feels like too much for many people. If you've ever experienced depression, though, you know that if you simply open a window and get some fresh air, it is almost like having a trillion dollars show up and solve all your problems. It's letting in that fresh air; it's letting in those fresh thoughts. It's allowing some extra space to come into the limited space that we have as individuals, allowing us to join the infinite space that's beyond us. A lot of what keeps us from moving is our unwillingness to breathe and to try to change. If we can break that barrier, the sky's the limit.

The notion of superiority or dominance is false evidence that appears real, and that's part of the deep history of racism in America. This is a nation that was founded by people of European descent who came with a spirit of domination and superiority, promoting a genocide that wiped out people who had learned how to live with the land. Indigenous people and people of African descent really understand what organizing is. We understand that land does not belong to people; rather, we are supposed to be the caregivers and

the shepherds, the people that take care of the land. Property is not to be bought and sold. It is to be shared and to be used communally so that everybody has a place to live, food to eat, and something to drink.

Until we refuse to accept the unacceptable—racism, poverty, environmental destruction, overcriminalization, and inequities in public schools—we're just spinning our wheels.

Organizing with Humility and Love

As humans, no matter how humble you think you are, there's always room to go deeper. We face so many pressures and obstacles. The challenge for organizers and leaders is to continue to deepen our humbleness so that when we're meeting these obstacles, we don't find ourselves hurting each other. We don't find ourselves becoming the very thing that we're fighting against.

Gratitude takes us a long, long way. No matter how devastated we might feel, no matter how defeated, no matter how bad the situation, if we can start listing the things that we're grateful for—that we can still feel, hear, see, touch or taste—there will be a domino effect that helps you to strengthen your joy, determination, and hope. Gratitude is contagious and we need more of it.

Our work is never to be about us individually but always to be about us collectively. When an individual happens to benefit because of something that we've all done, we have to see that through the lens that the world doesn't often show us: that Jonathan's win is my win and Mark's win is my win. When we are winning together, that makes us stronger, that makes us healthier, and that makes us well. That's our goal: for us all to be well.

In the end, I believe I'm fighting for peace, equity, and justice. I'm fighting for community to love and not give up on love. I'm fighting for healthy living and healthy lifestyles. I'm fighting for healthy mindsets, healthy hope, and healthy joy. I'm fighting

for the reality that we are worth not giving up on.
We are worth it all.

My organizing, like all good organizing, is based in love, the basics of loving your neighbor as yourself. If people love themselves, love other people, and for me love God, we could be experiencing Heaven on earth, and we should be. ❖

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