

Fund for Liberatory Practice

Reflection Summary - March 2024

Introduction

The Fund for Liberatory Practice (the Fund) was launched in 2022 by the Resilience Initiative and the LeadersTrust to help support and amplify the field-building and exploratory work of liberatory practitioners more broadly. It was designed to provide \$15,000 awards and modest communications support to organizational development practitioners who are in active, productive partnership with social change leaders and organizations and who are eager to expand and amplify liberatory practice. Fuller background and more context about the project, including the gap in practice support which the Fund set out to fill, is available upon request. The Fund's core objectives were to:

- Increase the ability among organizational development practitioners who lead with liberatory, equity-focused approaches to spend time defining, building-out and 'trying on' new ways of working at the leading edge of this practice;
- Engender greater opportunity among practitioners to share their insights and innovation in ways that also extend and deepen learning among peers and philanthropic partners; and
- Advance our collective understanding about innovative, equity-infused leadership and organizational practices which responsibly address the needs, interests, challenges and opportunities of today's social change leaders and teams.

The invitation to make submissions for funding—by brief videos or a three-question form—was released April 2022. It featured an easeful, simple process that created space for practitioners to share their point of view about, and experiences with, liberatory practice, as well as their purposes, approaches and wishes for impact. An information session, held on April 28th, 2022, was attended by more than 100

individuals. In all, 218 requests for funding were received by the due date of May 20, 2022.

A multi-layered review process unfolded over the summer of 2022, which ensured that every submission was read by multiple staff persons and advisors. In the fall of 2022, decisions about the 20 of the 218 practitioners who would receive awards were made.

Reviewers were deeply moved to learn how the mere act of inviting the submissions energized many practitioners; they named the power in 'being seen'. For some, it contributed to feelings of longed-for connection. Practitioners sent us messages such as these:

“Thank you for creating this offering. Receiving the call, and knowing this is happening, brought deep relief in being witnessed, celebrated, and hopefully in sparking more and more offerings like this of being resourced in the years to come for the embodied liberatory practices so many of us are already doing out of deep care for our communities, and with little to no financial resources while doing them.”

“Beyond any funding award decision, I want you all to know how emotional I was the first time I read your email invitation. I felt affirmed in a way I didn’t realize my spirit needed. I am certain that is a gift and treasure from which my offerings will continue to bloom. I bow in deep honoring and gratitude to all who put their hearts and minds into this beautiful and needed offering.”

“Having the opportunity to connect with like-hearted folx would be really valuable to us and we understand that there are many wonderful people doing amazing liberatory work. Though we’d certainly appreciate the funding, more than anything we would like the opportunity to connect and would be grateful to participate without the funding if that were a determining factor. We appreciate your support in creating these spaces and supporting the work of those bold and radical enough to fight for just and loving treatment of all beings.”

Since the awards were made, practitioners have been invited to be in community with each other and broader networks in a variety of ways. For example, interested

awarded practitioners were invited to share about themselves via a [Padlet](#); upload consultant profiles to a Consultant Resource Hub which reaches over 500 organizations; and access small grants for professional development. These small follow-up grants of \$1,300 for professional development, communications support, and special projects were drawn down by 14 of the 20 practitioners. One practitioner, Zulayka Santiago, used her \$1,300 to self-publish her book, *Outside I Breathe Freely*.

In support of ‘weaving’ and connecting, both awarded and unfunded practitioners have been made aware of opportunities to plug into other existing, trusted networks of social justice practitioners. The Fund is now moving in community with ‘sibling’ organizations in the Liberatory Leadership Partnership to build more expansive connective tissue with Black and BIPOC practitioners and social justice leaders across the country. Awarded and unfunded practitioners from the Fund for Liberatory Practice are being invited to affinity groups and events where the exchange of both resources and aspirations are facilitated.

With the following, we at the Fund share background about the 218 funded practitioners and their collective perspectives about the scope and nature of liberatory practice.

Our World, Our Work

We live in a hurting world. Mother/Patchamama/Nature/Land has been harmed spiritually and physically by colonization, slavery, violence, the misuse of power, overproduction, racism, capitalism, nuclear power, war, genocide...the list goes on.

Our ancestors, those that lived close to the land, experienced this deep pain, while also experiencing solidarity and right relationship with the land they were on. Their blood, skin and cells, have become a part of this earth; their bodies have nourished the land that continues to feed, shelter and protect us. Their stories are not only found in and on the land but also within each one of us.

Our blood holds the code to their dreams, pains, desires, etymology, memories and hopes for the generations to come. In the present moment, we are at a threshold. We have become deeply aware of past harms and trauma. We have been gifted with spaciousness and the ability to reflect. Many of us no longer live to merely survive but have been given the opportunity to generatively thrive.

This journey of thriving, reflecting, grieving, listening and creating is liberation. The modalities vary, but the goal is the same: to allow the participant (facilitator and receiver) to journey (as they need) in order to be in deep relationship with their ancestors and the land. When in right relationship with the ones that made you and that keep you alive, the ability to live in true peace and in true love is possible—rather, inevitable.

What is liberatory practice?

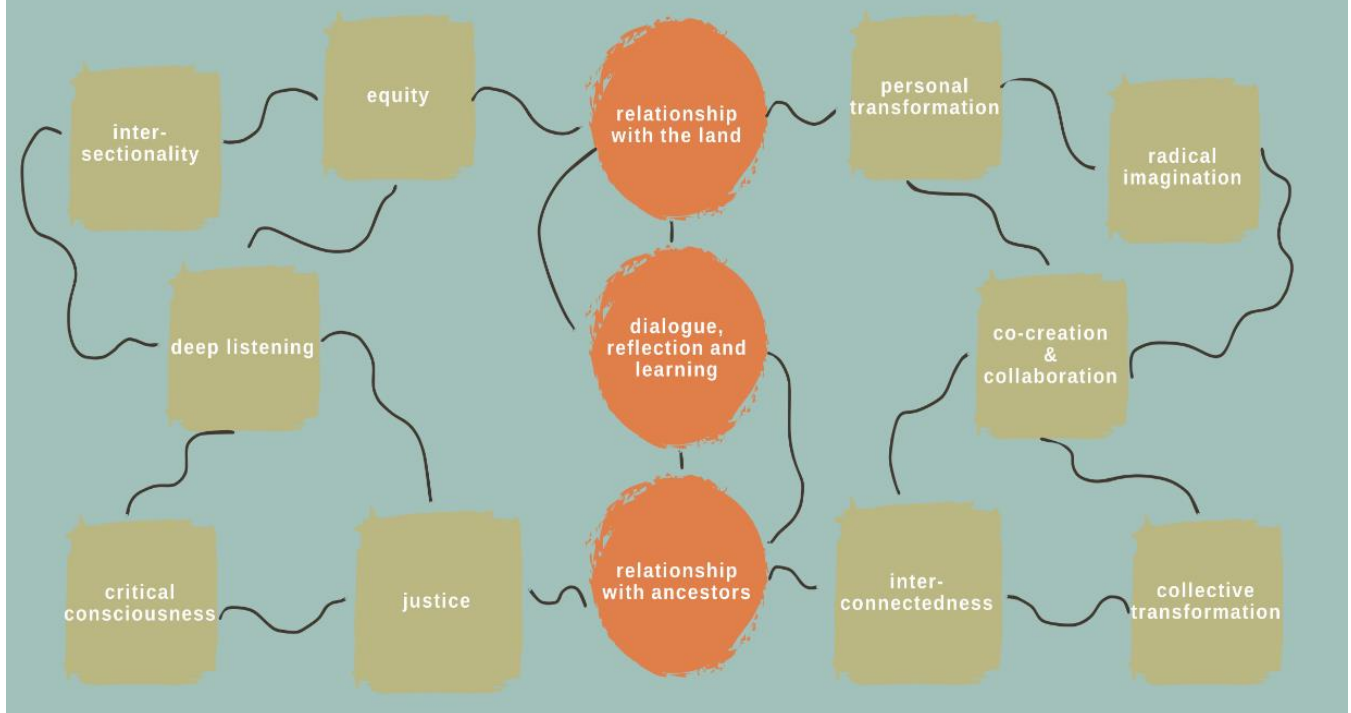
Liberatory practices are as ancient as Mother Earth’s heartbeat, a pulse that has been dulled by oppression, suffering and greed. These practices are a lifeline to connection of all the beings that the wind touches, that the water envelopes, and that the soil feeds.

Liberatory practice is a brave and generative pathway to healing across Dimensions: a pathway that de-centers the human species and looks to lean into the wisdom of our more than human kin. This pathway brings about collective unlearning and healing to a hurting world; it is a space for generative lamentation.

What is possible when liberatory practices are present?

When liberatory practices are present, true transformation is possible. Transformation that could bring about the end of oppression for all people and humanity can be experienced in its truest sense.

Common Principles and Central Goals of Liberatory Practices

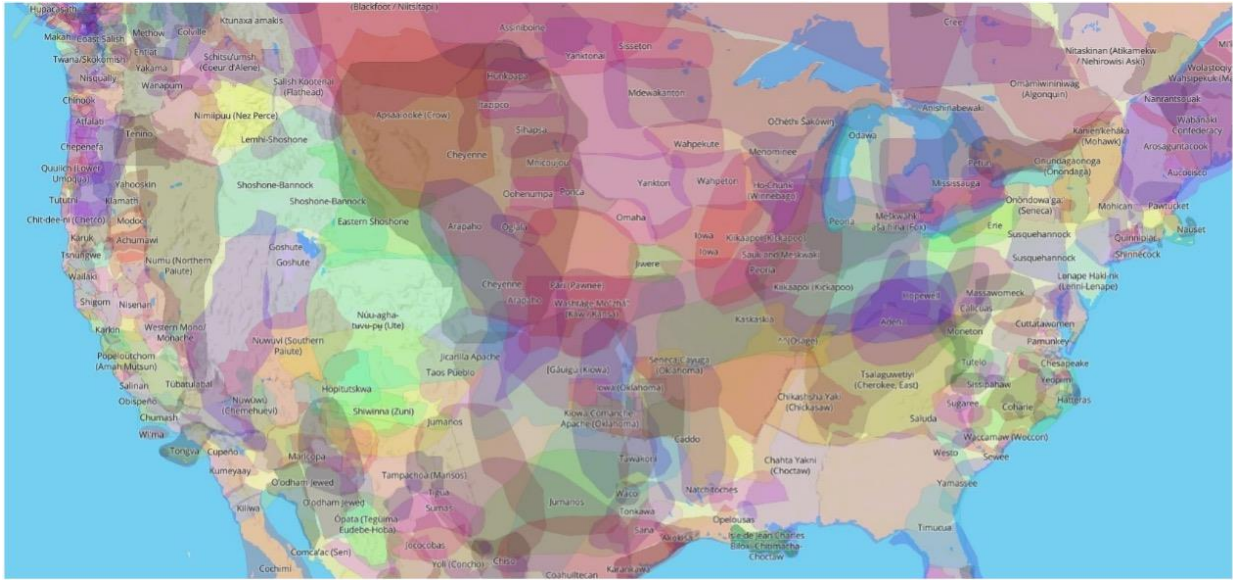


About the Liberatory Practitioners

Liberatory practitioners are birth workers, consultants, evaluators, psychotherapists, coaches, educators, cultural organizers, mentors, facilitators and leaders who themselves are also journeying towards liberation while championing individuals, teams and organizations to seek and embody liberation for the wellbeing of the world. We did not ask people to identify themselves demographically in the funding submissions. Even so, a good number offered notes about their backgrounds, summarized on the next page.

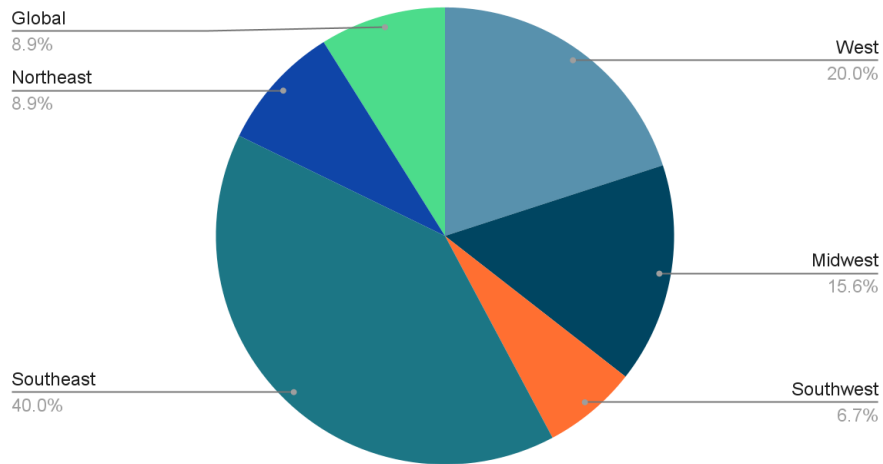
Location and Geographic Breakdown

Following is the geographic breakdown of the 45 people who shared the location of their practice, organized by region of the United States. We encourage folks to also consider the Tribal Nations that existed in these regions in 1491, below:



Native Nations of the lower 48 United States, the year 1491. (Photo Credit: Native Land Digital, 2021)

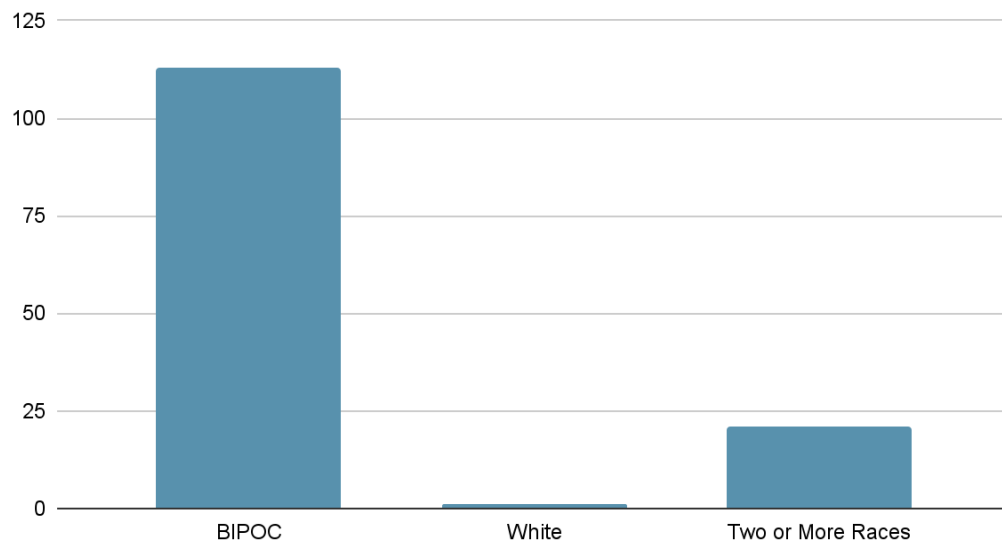
Location of Liberatory Practitioners

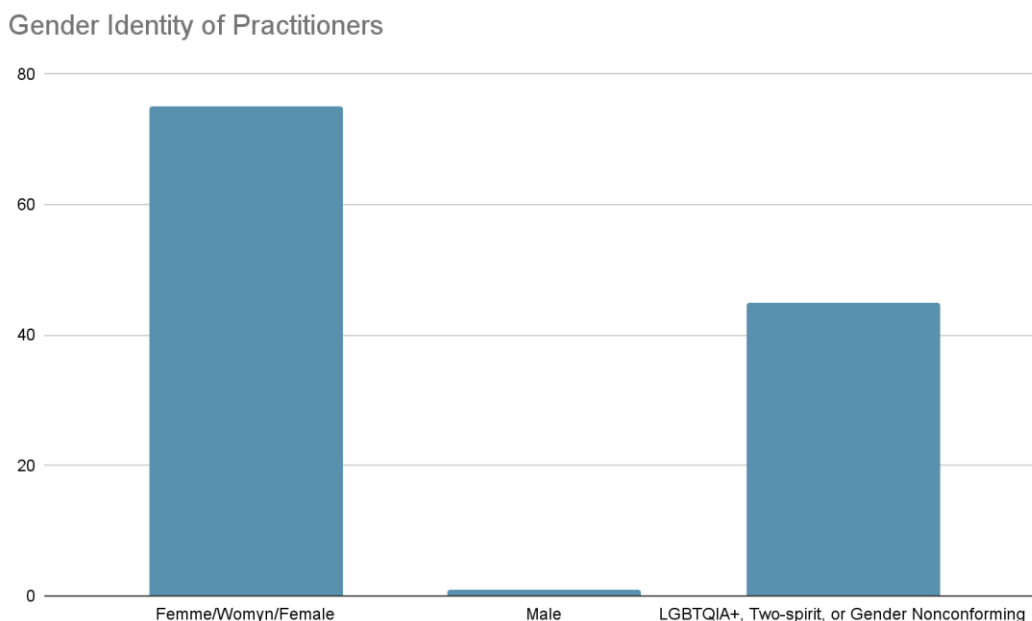


Race and Gender Breakdown

One hundred and fourteen (114) practitioners self-identified their race and 105 shared their gender. Most practitioners identified as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and 42.8% self-identified as LGBTQIA+, Two-spirit, or Gender Nonconforming. Breakdowns of race and gender are shown below.

Race of Liberatory Practitioners





Practitioner Insights about Liberatory Practice

In fall of 2023, we invited awarded and unfunded practitioners (from among those who signaled that they would be available) to help “story-tell” about the Fund. Our specific invitation was to meet with our story-telling team and share more fully about their point of view about what constitutes liberatory practice. In all, 27 liberatory practitioners participated in four focus groups and answered two key questions:

- What is liberatory practice?
- What is possible when liberatory practices are present?

The following are the themes that emerged. First, what are liberatory practices? They...

- are an investment towards the liberation of all; it requires a belief that a healing does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is an energy that enables the healing of others and one day, the world.

- are a pathway to connecting ourselves to our ancestors and to earth. This connection creates a path of earthly stewardship in which we see earth as sacred and divine. It is a reminder that humxns come from earth, are nourished by earth, and therefore we are also sacred and divine.
- surpass politics, money, shifts in culture and societal expectations; they are rooted in values that stand the test of time because these values are based in ancestral and earthly knowledge.
- require spaciousness that can at times be counter to how many organizations operate; leaders could be responsible to create ample space for liberatory practices to not only occur, but for learnings and healing to be integrated into culture.
- ask for a letting go of the logical, numerical approaches to the world and to open ourselves up for the possibility of magic, mystery and love.
- ask for community, for collective commitment to healing and change. The integration of these practices cannot happen in a vacuum or in isolation; healing and integration are a pathway to living in a different reality with others.
- cultivate spaces for moving through conflict because as healing and liberation are centered, a soft environment for meeting one another in our wholeness, regardless of power, is created.
- provide spaces for the intersections of Blackness, Brownness, Coloredness, Disabilities and more to be in their entirety without judgment, explanation or shame, so that all can have an opportunity to come back to themselves, to feel the softness of just being in their entirety.

And what is possible when liberatory practices are present?

- A new world is possible, where imaginations can run free and create a world where the collective thrives, where there is no fear to try different ways of being as a society.
- As a collective, we can be brave, exercise and strengthen the muscle of courage so that all can feel safe in their bodies to connect with others.

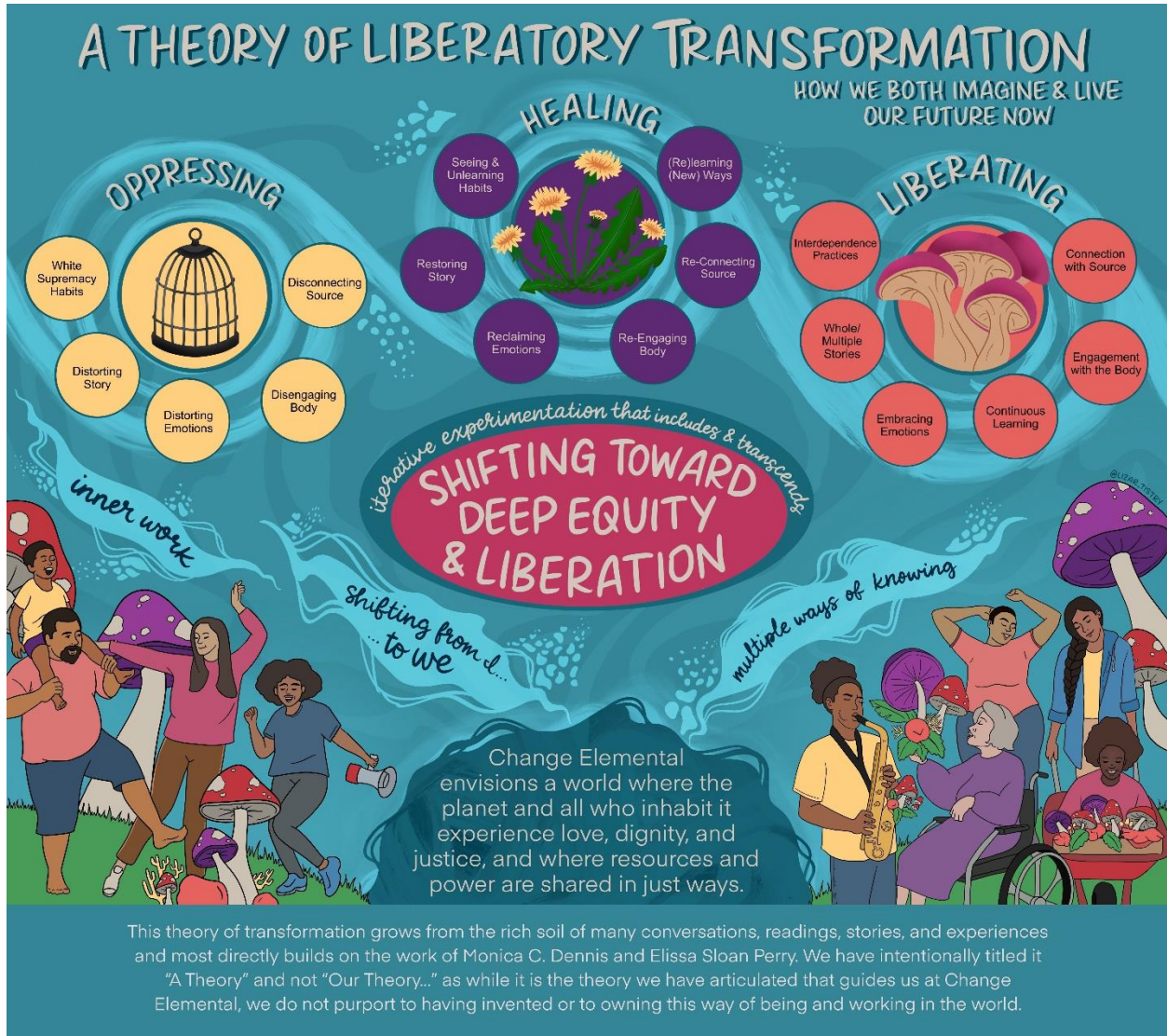
- The connective tissue between generations mends; ancestral lines converge, bridging the past and future in a harmonious dance of belonging and evolution.
- Vulnerability ceases to be a liability, fostering honesty and richness in interpersonal connections.
- Resources flow towards collective economies, networks of support are built, and creative risks for new worlds are embraced with the assurance of a supportive community.
- Adaptability and regeneration thrive within the framework of movement ecology. Self-discovered creativity flows seamlessly, creating a sense of energetic movement to imagine, manifest and live into a more compassionate, loving reality.
- The reality of uncharted territory of imagination, where systems are not just reactive but proactive, and where community, love and a sense of scale guide the trajectory of a world liberated from the constraints of the past, exist.
- The experimentation of diverse approaches to meeting people's needs becomes real. Families, friendships, and collaborations flourish, unburdened by trauma. The reduction of societal afflictions marks a healthier, more harmonious existence.

A Theory of Liberatory Transformation and Liberatory Practices

What we learned from the practitioners about their purposes and approaches align well with the Theory of Liberatory Transformation and Liberatory Practices developed by Change Elemental and rooted in Black feminist wisdom and primarily builds on the work of Monica C. Dennis and Elissa Sloan Perry.

Change Elemental partners with individuals, organizations, and networks to co-create power for love, dignity, and justice. As a nonprofit focused on the learning and practice necessary for liberatory transformation, its practitioners join with clients and partners to combine wisdom and experimentation, experience and reflection, imagination and co-creation, and design powerful approaches to lasting change that include shifts in what we do, how we do it, and who we are while we are doing it.

We ‘call in’ the work of Change Elemental as a foundational framing for liberatory practice aimed at supporting social justice leaders, organizations, and ecosystems.



Change Elemental “envisions a world where the planet and all who inhabit it experience love, dignity, and justice, and where resources and power are shared in just ways.” Advancing this vision requires us to shift toward deep equity and liberation. This is complex, systems change. The way forward is both planful and emergent, requiring experimentation and iteration, and calling us to define,

understand, and share leadership and power differently. This takes inner work and embracing multiple ways of knowing. These five elements are interconnected, interdependent, and always evolving. Practicing them requires us to include and transcend practices of oppression and healing while investing in and amplifying liberating practices—practices of being in continuous, robust, and intentional relationship with source, body, emotions, and stories. ¹

This vision, and the understanding of what it takes to advance it within the theory of transformation, aligns with the goals of liberatory practices. Based on the responses by practitioners, and in alignment with the framework, a central way to achieve the world we want is to be in deep relationship with ancestors and land².

The process of drawing close to ancestors may bring about the emotional weight that comes with identifying all the harmful ways oppression has impacted our own lineage. Yet, this is an important step towards healing; this, at times painful, journey is the place where folx can somatically understand how colonization and violence have lived in their bodies and minds.

As people grow aware of the impacts of oppression, they are provided an invitation to heal—to no longer remain in anguish, but to transform our wrath and anger into generative energy to create a new reality. A reality of liberation, a world where land, ancestors, and we ourselves live in a harmonious relationship. A process where the individual becomes irrevocably a part of the whole.

The journey is rarely linear, but rather a dance: two steps forward, three steps to the side, maybe another few steps forward...and spin. But it is the journey back to our roots, to ourselves, where we can fully embody the sacred. Liberatory practitioners are the conduits of our ancestors and openings to an interdependent future, the ones willing to listen to the voices of sacred truth. These practitioners nurture this truth and

¹ <https://changeelemental.org/>

² You can read more about the Theory of Liberatory Transformation [here](#), as well as its Black Feminist roots [here](#)

hold spaces of invitation for others to also silence the voices of oppression to hear the ancestral whispers, the whispers calling us all towards a life of liberation.

Acknowledgements and Appreciations

The Fund was powered by a community that included staff coordinators, field advisors (formal and informal), funding partners and storytellers.

The Fund Coordinators: The Fund for Liberatory Practice 2021-2023 was initially conceived of, and is managed by, a staff team at the [LeadersTrust](#) and the Resilience Initiative, which is a partner of The LeadersTrust that provides a range of peer learning, coaching and other offerings for social justice organizations.

The Fund Advisors: We are profoundly grateful for the guidance and generosity of the Fund's "First Phase" Advisors, all of whom were invited to this role because of the depth and range of their experience and wisdom. **They are [Bex Ahuja](#), [Aryah Lester](#), [Jean Ries](#), [Jesenia Santana](#), [Ericka Stallings](#) and [Marissa Tirona](#).**

Our Inspiration and Teachers: This Fund and its hopes, values and goals have been inspired and informed by the nonprofit leaders with whom the project coordinators work daily, and who generously share their stories, insights and aspirations with them, as well as by the many practitioners with which The LeadersTrust and the Resilience Initiative teams have had the privilege of learning from and with, most especially: Monica Dennis, Rachael Ibrahim, the Co-LAB team inclusive of Maura Bairley and Viveka Chen, the Change Elemental team, Heidi Maria Lopez, Ana Polanco, Trish Tchume, Angelica Otero, Cathy Dang, merle mcgee, Fiona Kanagasingam of the BIPOC team, and every member of the Capacity Coach community at the LeadersTrust.

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sharing a vision with us about this work, and for their faith in this team to advance this special project.

Our Storytellers: The staff team worked in partnership with Shiree Teng, Ernesto Saldaña and Corina Pinto to organize the voices and perspectives of the liberatory practitioners. Querido Galdo is appreciated for their design work on this document.