

Seth Kirshenbaum Dvar - Yom Kippur 2023/5784

Hi Boston Workers Circle Friends. What a gift to be a part of this community, one that cares for each other and works to transform the world toward justice. And what an honor to be speaking here today.

You probably know my partner of the last 20 years - the amazing Jen Kiok – who served as BWC's executive director. You might also know my children – Rose and Jonah – who were part of the B'nai Mitzvah classes in 2021 and 2023, and who will hopefully get involved in our amazing BWC teen program called TASC. Today I am going to tell you a little bit about my story.

On this Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, we are asked to reflect on our lives, ask forgiveness, including from ourselves, and turn towards who we long to be. The story I tell you today is about two turns I made in life, the first a turn toward justice, and the second a turn towards liberation. I believe that without both, neither is possible.

My turn toward justice began at 6pm on October 16, 1996. I was in my junior year of college and a white supremacist was elected president of our student government. His first act as student body president on that night was to kick all of the people of color off the student assembly. Over the next two weeks the campus rose up in protest - sit-ins, rallies, boycotts, New York Times articles, news helicopters overhead. In the most intense moment, the university's police beat, arrested and pepper sprayed hundreds of students of color protesting outside the assembly meeting, all the while I was left safe and untouched inside. It was a stark awakening to both white supremacy and white privilege, and forever turned my life toward justice.

A few months later I led the impeachment of that white supremacist president for "stuffing ballot boxes and stealing the election" (which I know sounds familiar). And despite his open antisemitism and threats on my life, I ran for office that spring using his same campaign slogan about integrity, and I won.

That moment of turning led me to feel a sense of belonging and purpose and courage I had never before experienced. And a commitment to heal the world, though at the time my young righteous self called it revolution. Starting then and continuing for the past 25 years, I have been blessed to be part of truly transformative and purposeful work:

For 18 years I served as a youth worker and youth organizer. I co-founded two groups: Quilombo NYC with the leaders of that college protest, and Beantown Society in Jamaica Plain with Jen and a group of ten 15 year olds. I held my dream job for twelve years as first Program Director and then Co-Director of The City School in Dorchester. I

was a founding board member of Critical Resistance, Angela Davis's abolitionist organization, where I worked with former political prisoners and prison activists, including Rachel Maddow of MSNBC fame, to abolish the prison industrial complex. More recently I worked at Resist, a 55 year old grassroots community foundation funding some of the most inspiring grassroots organizations across the country.

My current role is as co-founder and co-director of Movement Sustainability Commons where we nourish and sustain people and groups working for justice and liberation. We do this in traditional ways by offering services like fiscal sponsorship, financial management and fundraising support. And more visionary offerings like a community Restival, our Circle of Elders who help resolve conflicts and heal harm, and what is currently the most consuming part of my work, building a \$15 million dollar movement center in Roxbury to house City Life/Vida Urbana, Center for Economic Democracy, Sisters Unchained and most excitedly Neighborhood Birth Center.

All of this is to share that I was a part of some amazing and magical work. I still am. But what I didn't understand until more recently was that it was having a cancerous effect on me. I was committed, but I was also righteous and lacking humility, my ego was fed but my heart was not. I was driven by gaining affirmation from people of color to prove my own value, that I was a good person. By the time I was 25 I no longer had white friends because instead of believing I was better than people of color, as white supremacy tells us, I started believing I was better than other white people. I started dressing differently, speaking differently, so much so that when Jen met me, she thought I was puerto rican. I had turned away from my authentic self and my Jewish culture, and unconsciously became filled with self-hate. Instead of finding liberation, I found superiority in a different form, and it left my heart broken and empty.

This brings me to the last part of my story today, my second turn, this one toward liberation. For me, the difference between justice and liberation is that the struggle for justice is about healing the world, out there, while the struggle for liberation is about healing ourselves, in here. With justice, it may or may not be about us. With liberation, we are always at the center.

Liberation is a journey, not a destination, that for me has three components:

1. Learning to love ourselves.
2. Breaking free from beliefs of superiority and inferiority to others.
3. Ending patterns and behaviors that were learned to survive in response to our own or intergenerational trauma, and no longer serve us.

I began my turn towards liberation in 2003 when through a leap of faith, I fell in love with Jen and in doing so, learned to love myself. Her heart was so open, and through her

love my heart opened as well. With this vulnerability I was able to take off my masks and armor, and over time live closer and closer to my authentic self, awkwardness and all. And this, of course, brought me a depth of connection with others as well as a deeper sense of happiness and joy.

My liberation journey deepened as I found ways to break free from internalized superiority and inferiority. A key moment for me in this process was when I attended Gibrán Rivera's Evolutionary Leadership retreat in 2016. Nearly everyone I've met who has gone on this retreat before or since has found it life changing. A powerful teaching from that retreat that I still practice today is that when there is someone in the room who I feel repelled by and want to avoid, that is the person to reach for. Whatever about them repels me, whether they remind me of someone or have views different from my own, is in actuality something that is a shadow part of myself or my past that needs attention and love to heal. An example around superiority is how I now lean into connection with other white men, whereas before I would lean away. An example around inferiority is how I now lean into relationships with people of wealth, despite my discomfort.

And finally, to end patterns and behaviors that no longer serve me, a teacher of mine Tuesday Ryan-Hart offered wisdom toward healing the trauma in my body using three practices:

1. A regular somatic practice, which for me is a daily walk or run.
2. A regular practice to calm my nervous system, which for me was somatic therapy and now is meditation.
3. And an "as needed" practice to break the stuck patterns and behaviors that no longer serve me by sitting in plant medicine ceremony once or twice a year led by trusted guides. I've been blessed to connect with the psychedelic renaissance happening and am happy to talk with anyone here if you want to learn more, as I wish someone had spoken with me years ago.

Today I stand before you the happiest and healthiest I have ever been. I feel my life force full of curiosity and joy. Anxiety, fear and depression have quieted. I do feel sadness, and love it because now it shows up as sadness, whereas before it would show up as anger masking hurt. I take care of myself today with healthy boundaries in ways that in the past would have felt selfish. I believe the best thing I can do as a parent is take care of myself, so I can be present with my children and model for them living with integrity. As a result I now pour love into my children in ways I wish I did when I and they were younger. And lastly, I've learned to surrender, fully, to what is. I

trust I will be ok no matter what happens externally, because now, I fill my own cup. I love myself whole.

I want to close with an embodied practice.

For those who are able, I invite you to take a deep breath and hold it for five seconds, and as you hold your breath, tighten as many muscles in your body as you can. Now slowly let that breath go, and relax your body. That holding your breath and tightening is what intergenerational trauma often feels like in our bodies. That letting go of breath and loosening of grip, that is the feeling of liberation.

This community is skilled in healing the world. I invite us all to reflect on what we need to heal ourselves and our people as well. Thank you.