



A REVOLUTION OF THE **SOUL**

**To realize the unfulfilled promise of our democracy
as one where all can thrive, we must commit to developing an individual
and collective soul that can love all.**

This supplement details how we must move forward into this transformative work of our time by getting our souls right and serving as founders of a new nation that can hold, honor, and nourish all.

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THE POWER OF THE SOUTH: **Welcome to Atlanta**

**The history of communities of color in the American South
cannot be separated from the fight for democracy.**

BY NATHANIEL SMITH

The fight for democracy and inclusion has been a defining feature of America's history. For some, this brings to mind the Founding Fathers, who signed a declaration that all people are created equal. But these men were not the architects of this nation. That achievement belongs to the people who have fought to hold America to the self-evident truth of equality, dedicating their lives to making multiracial democracy a reality.

In 1995, the rapper André 3000 declared that “the South got something to say.” It does, and as history has shown, the South also has so much to give. People across the region have given their bodies and souls to realizing America's potential for everyone. The history of African Americans, Native Americans, and other communities of color in the American South—where enslaved people were first brought to this nation in 1619—cannot be separated from the fight for democracy.

The Civil War. Reconstruction. The Civil Rights Movement, which we at the Partnership for Southern Equity call the Southern Freedom Movement. The election of Barack Obama. The racial reckoning

following the murder of George Floyd. At these critical inflection points in our nation's history, people of color and allies across the South have risen up to help make America the place it aspires to be but has yet to become: a nation for all. Across the South, these people have disrupted, fought, and refused to be denied their rights in these moments. They have served as the nation's moral conscience.

It is no coincidence that PolicyLink has brought us together here in the American South, in Atlanta, to reflect on a revolution of the soul.

We remain acutely aware of a powerful counterforce, built on fear and fueled by resentment, that works to ensure that nothing changes for our most marginalized. And yet we must win, and we will.

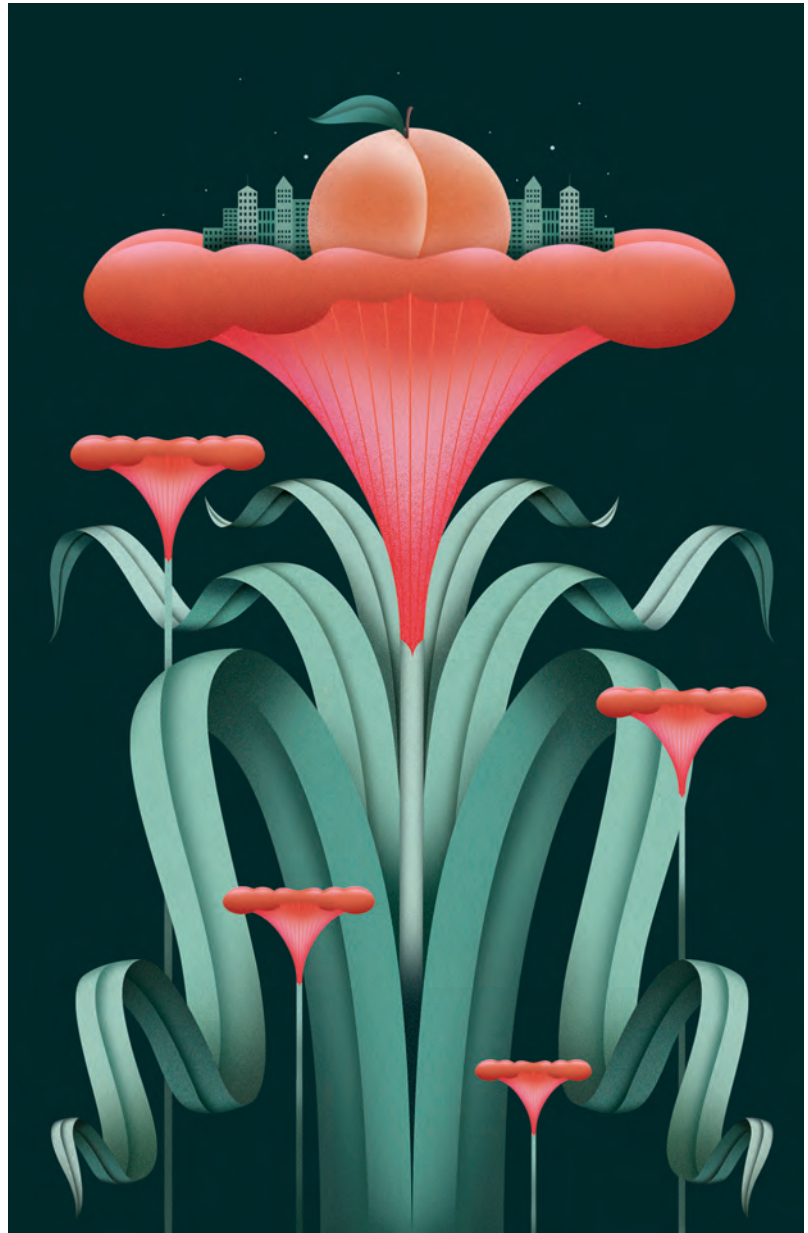
Before all of us is a path that leads to the beloved community that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. eloquently described: a community where all people experience justice and share in the wealth of the Earth. That path moves through the South. For many, Atlanta is the “logistical home” of the Southern Freedom Movement and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which has aimed to “redeem the soul of America.”

What Dr. King knew then to be true now feels as true as ever: If our souls are not strong, we cannot advance the policies, programs, or large-scale changes that make life better for everyone. The real work of transformative change must happen from the inside out. Real change starts with the heart.

So let us use this time together in this powerful place to strengthen our spirits and position ourselves to best reflect our ancestors' wildest dreams, fortifying not only our ability to advance equity, but also our ability to live it.

As an organization that holds the history and future of the American South at the center of our work, we are proud of our heritage. We are also proud to welcome you here as we continue this work together. W. E. B. Du Bois noted, “As the South goes, so goes the nation.” If we are going to move our nation forward, the South will guide our movement, especially when it comes to what it teaches us about the revolution that must take place in our souls.

We must embrace our responsibility to realize a multiracial democracy, which becomes possible only when we encourage the dignity and humanity of all people. We can lean on the legacy of leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Joseph Echols Lowery, and Hosea Williams to work together in the spirit of love, the most transformative force in the universe. We must appreciate that equity is love in action—not a what, but a way. We must wield love as a powerful force to create policy that reflects our values, and we must wield it to turn enemies into friends. We must harness empathy as the bridge between love and action, manifesting it in our work and in redeeming the soul of America. We must fortify the power of diverse



coalitions working together to elevate the nation, drawing on the example of the Poor People's Campaign of yesterday and today.

This will not be an easy road ahead. Painful moments in history, such as the assassination of Dr. King, have taught us this lesson. There will be losses, compromises, and uncertainty. But we must continue to move forward together to realize our goals, honor our ancestors, and create a better world for future generations. While the opposition may have assassinated the dreamer, they cannot extinguish the dream. We are carriers of the dream that is the beloved community, and we will win.

Welcome to Atlanta. We are so glad you are here.

Nathaniel Smith is founder and chief equity officer of Partnership for Southern Equity.

OUR JOURNEY TO A CONSCIOUSNESS OF ALL

**To renew ourselves and the nation,
we must envision and build a shared future so
expansive and uncompromising that
it becomes irresistible.**

BY MICHAEL MCAFEE & ASHLEIGH GARDERE

A quarter century ago, PolicyLink's founding leaders undertook a bold experiment to build a Black-led policy organization, headquartered about as far as possible from the DC Beltway, with the mission of advancing racial equity. Today, this might not seem so audacious, but the idea was radical at the time. It went against the well-intended advice of close friends and allies who didn't think the nation was ready for such a concept. People understand *equality* and *justice*, they reasoned, but you will lose them with *equity*.

There was some truth in their counsel: The nation wasn't ready. But readiness is a luxury we're rarely afforded at pivotal moments in our history. Commonsense ideas of equality and justice, while good and necessary, were not expansive enough to help us realize our potential as individuals and as a society. The vision of society that PolicyLink was founded on required an imaginative new worldview to lift our collective gaze to the horizon of possibility. Ready or not, that vision demanded equity—just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.

Since our founding, the world has continually changed—and so must we. The country has grappled with race in new, often painful and sometimes promising ways. Our movement has worked to craft the framing and surface the data to position people impacted by structural oppression in public discourse; to elevate the principle of equity and build the political will to act on that principle; and to lift up the voice, wisdom, and experience of people long excluded from consideration in policy debates and decision-making. Now “equity” is a ubiquitous part of the daily lexicon across all sectors.

The equity movement has also enjoyed policy victories at all levels of government, including presidential executive orders, as well as in the private sector. With these achievements, our collective efforts have helped

shape the nation's history. Our dedication, connections, and solidarity have proven our greatest strengths.

And yet the political whiplash the nation has experienced in the last 25 years serves as a stark reminder that none of our victories are fully secured. Despite incremental progress, the systems that produce inequity and injustice appear immune to transformation, and ideological divisions seem deeper than ever. We have seen binary thinking and ideological polarization incubate in the American body politic, feeding not only the cancer of human suffering but also a malignant uncertainty about the credibility of our civil institutions.

But this is not a moment to retreat. Instead, we must strengthen our commitment to the world we want to create. We are the heirs of a nation that can still live up to its noblest ideals, which is both a gift and a humbling responsibility. We should remember the words of John Gardner, the former US secretary of health, education, and welfare, who cautioned against the risk of atrophy for institutions, societies, and leaders that fail to address the need for reflection and renewal. “High standards are not enough,” Gardner wrote. “A society that has reached heights of excellence may already be caught in the rigidities that will bring it down. An institution may hold itself to the highest standards and yet already be entombed in the complacency that will eventually spell its decline.”

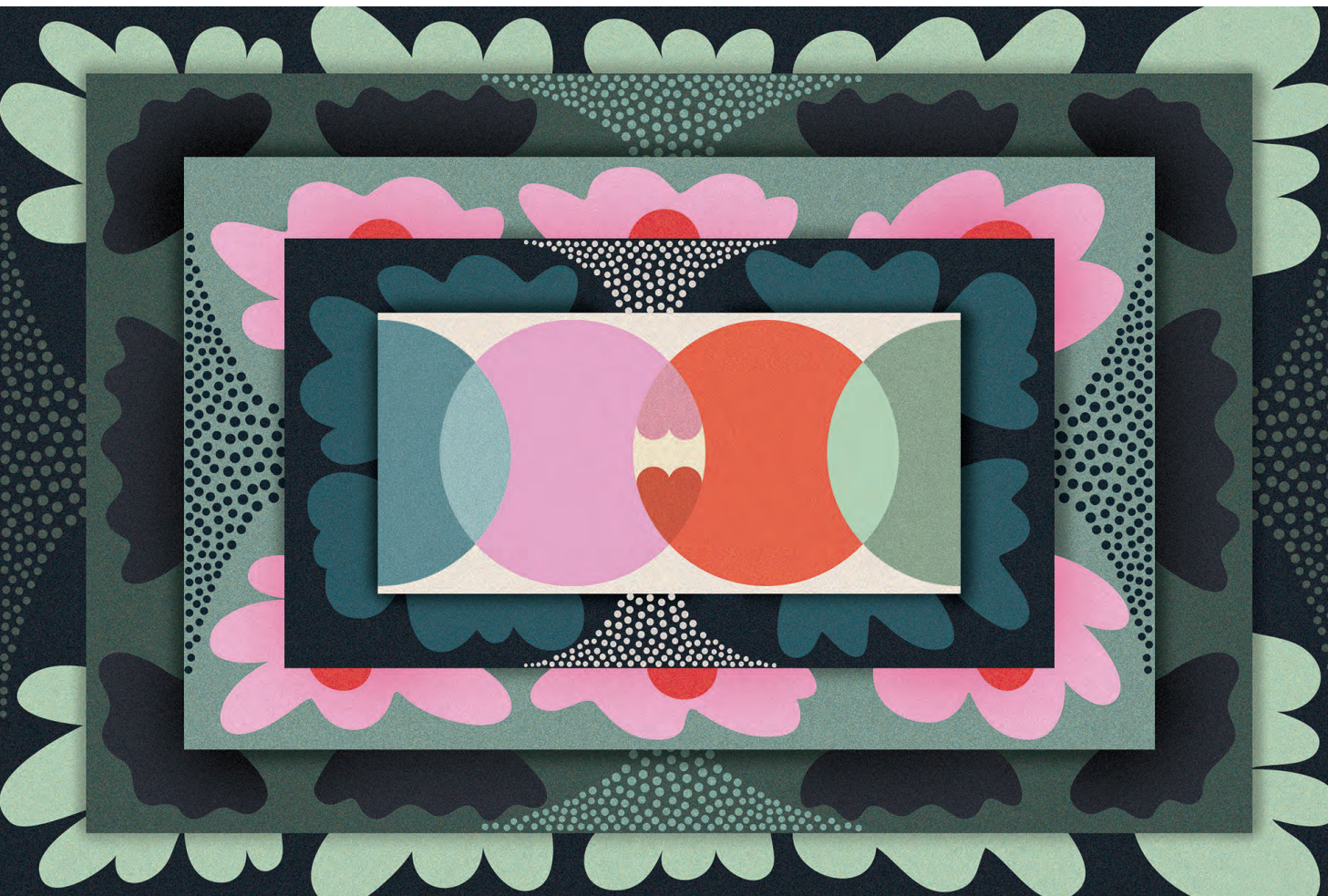
To take seriously this warning against the atrophy of our institutions and leadership, we must pause and reflect on our own actions with humility and loving accountability. Which of our habits have outlived their usefulness? What practices are stuck in outdated paradigms? Where have we idealized solutions and romanticized ideas that would be better served by concrete action? Where has the power of our movement been siphoned away into symbolic battles, semantic debates, and cosmetic adjustments in the face of oppressive systems?

PolicyLink's leadership has wrestled with these questions in an ongoing process of self-reflection. Time and again, we have asked ourselves, as all organizations should, “Do we deserve to exist?” Our organizational result, the North Star against which we want to be held accountable, is that all people in the United States of America—particularly those who face the barriers of structural oppression—participate in a flourishing democracy, prosper in an equitable economy, and live in thriving communities of opportunity. Are we stewarding our resources and marshaling our efforts to produce actual, meaningful progress toward that end?

For better or worse, the political and social environments in which we operate have changed, and we know that yesterday's maps do not accurately reflect tomorrow's terrain. “Adapt or perish,” wrote H. G. Wells, “is nature's inexorable imperative.” This is the crossroads we have reached as a movement and as a nation. If we intend to continue changing the world, we must prepare to change ourselves, our institutions, and our ways of being in the world.

This is the hard truth our movement now confronts: If we are going to achieve our aims, we must be willing to think and move differently, lest the contentment of our successes become our downfall. “Renewal,” Gardner observed, “is not just innovation and change. It is also the process of bringing the results of change into line with our purposes.”

To renew ourselves and the nation, we must occupy the highest ground, spiritually and politically, and fortify ourselves to be ready to advance



change. We have to envision and build a shared future so expansive and uncompromising that it becomes irresistible. We must operate with indomitable love, attending to both the soul work and practical revolutionary thinking that the future demands.

Six years ago, we published a report, “100 Million and Counting: A Portrait of Economic Insecurity in the United States,” to provide a clear-eyed and data-driven assessment of the economic challenges facing so many in the nation. As we were beginning to move into a more disciplined approach to our organizational results, we found that there were more than 100 million people in the United States living in or near poverty—and that half of them were white.

In the data we found structural oppression—and we found that it had metastasized. Exclusion, alienation, and exploitation have spread across systems, inflicting deep personal and community wounds across race, gender, class, or geography. We saw plainly the depth of pain in which so many people are living.

This moment turned out to be soul-searching for our institution: Would we center the 100 million people and serve who the data tells us to serve?

Our mission and legacy were built on centering racial equity. Our staff was, and remains, composed mostly of people of color and entirely of individuals committed to remedying racial inequities. Some among us were troubled by the implication that PolicyLink would name a target population (the 100 million) that seemed to undercut our focus on racial equity. Should we focus on the needs of the roughly 50 million people of color within that group? This discomfort was not unreasonable. For Black and Brown people who have lived with structural racism, the frustration and fear that they might be asked to sacrifice or suspend their hard-won visibility is understandable. For individuals who have dedicated their lives to this work, the perceived threat to their identity and ways of operating in the world is not unfounded.

We confronted questions about who we would serve and who we might deny. Would we let go of the familiar and even “successful” constraints in

Moral leadership requires acknowledging difficulties, considering objections, and demonstrating a willingness to do what is right and just, and to take responsibility for the consequences.

which we operated to honor a deeper, if more difficult, principle? It was a moment of trembling: We heard objections that to serve all would be naive and self-defeating. We heard trepidation that widening our gaze would amount to surrendering our mission, which remained incomplete. But this was a moment of steadfast resolution, when we reaffirmed that we would follow the clarion call of equity, no matter what.

We could not in good conscience deny anyone. For PolicyLink, embracing all of those 100 million people aligned with the definition of equity that was always at the heart of our mission: Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. In other words, the ends of equity have always been ends for everyone: the transformation of our society—our laws, regulations, customs, institutions, and ways of relating—so that everyone can flourish.

The task of leadership is not to avoid discomfort. Rather, when leaders grasp what is right, just, and true, fidelity to these ideals must be nonnegotiable. Moral leadership requires acknowledging difficulties, considering objections, and demonstrating a willingness to do what is right and just, and to take responsibility for the consequences.

We know that embracing the “all” as the fullest expression of equity is not an easy ask, but it is the only path to the future we envision: A society where a person’s race or zip code does not predict their life outcomes. A nation where no one is expected to experience violence or poverty or hunger or privation. The dismantling of social systems built on oppressive hierarchies of human value.

Our generation’s most important work is neither to relitigate the challenges we face nor to reframe their solutions. No better case could be made for inclusion or belonging than has already been made, and our movement has demonstrated all the brilliance, technical sophistication, and dedication we need. But these qualities alone will not be enough to realize the promise of equity.

Now we must summon the courage and discipline to remake our society so that all people can prosper and thrive, working at the scale of the opportunities that confront us.

The psychotherapist Alfred Adler wrote, “It is always easier to fight for one’s principles than to live up to them.” This is doubly the case when the society that would allow us to live the promise of equity doesn’t yet exist. We have been socialized to fight the good fight in a world that could hardly tolerate, much less demand, that we live up to our highest principles. We must make that demand of ourselves, and in so doing call forth a world that is worthy of our ideals.

This is the journey we are on today, and it is the journey we invite you to join. In this essay, we have shared a glimpse of our path to embracing all. In “A Revolution of the Soul,” we impart some of the insights we have gleaned and the challenges with which we have wrestled, and we make the case for why we must learn to love everyone.

The task before us is to make an evolutionary leap to build social, cultural, and governing systems that work in service of human flourishing while manifesting within our souls an abiding love for all.

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Ashleigh Gardere is president of PolicyLink.

A REVOLUTION OF THE SOUL

**We the people of the United States
stand at a critical crossroads in our history,
and we have a choice to make.
The mandate of this moment is to
govern for all.**

BY MICHAEL MCAFEE & ABBIE LANGSTON

On the precipice of a fifth industrial revolution and converging political, economic, and environmental crises, American society faces deep social uncertainty. It is also a time of profound demographic change: Babies born this year will come of voting age just as the United States becomes a majority-people-of-color nation. In a watershed moment for democracy, this election cycle will determine who holds the office of president and 88 percent of seats in Congress, and only 37 percent of Americans trust the federal government to address the challenges we face. A healthy skepticism of government is an American tradition, but a precipitous drop from the 52 percent average from the last 50 years ought to serve as a critical warning about the health of our union.

The governing of our nation sits on a tremoring fault line, with the bedrock principles of liberty, justice, and equal protection under growing pressure on all sides. And in the tectonic shifts to come, a decision that we collectively make will answer whether our institutions, systems, and governing structures are sound enough to fulfill the nation’s promise. It will determine whether our nation serves the interests of all, nurturing the strength of our differences and safeguarding the dignity and well-being of every person.

The decision before us is whether we stake a claim as rightful cofounders of the nation—the most powerful mantle the equity movement could take up—invoking not just the stewardship of government but also the cocreation of the entire social fabric. If the answer is yes, then our next revolution must be of the soul: developing both the collective and individual soul to love all. This expansive, radically inclusive love can renew the mind and spirit of this nation, strengthening the bonds of interdependence and mutuality and uniting us in the common cause of universal human flourishing.



The transformational power of love for all to heal our collective wounds and forge a thriving shared future must be fulfilled by governing for all. As we describe in this article, harnessing the moral authority of governing to realize the principles seeded in the nation's Charters of Freedom requires us to demand nothing less than systems, structures, and norms calibrated for the flourishing of all people. If the governed are our concern, then *all* of the governed must be our concern.

Our nation's past is etched with pain and exclusion. The founders perpetrated genocide against Indigenous peoples, whom they referred to as "merciless Indian Savages," and established chattel slavery in the law of the land. At least one-third of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders, and when they spoke of the rights of citizens, they meant only propertied white men such as themselves.

But our history, however imperfect, gives us reason to hope. For all their flaws, the founders inscribed into the cornerstone of the nation, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Two hundred years later, Martin Luther King Jr. reflected on the words of the founders: "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir." This remains our country's unfulfilled promise, and we must rise up to deliver it.

The redemption of that promissory note will be fulfilling the promise that this nation belongs to everyone, that we each have a stake in the society we become. Its redemption will be the fulfillment of the promise of liberty and justice for all. And its redemption will be a willful act of love: a choice about how we relate to one another that carries with it an inextricable accountability.

As a nation, we have not yet made good on our foundational commitments to liberty, justice, and equality, or to government of, by, and for the people. But neither have we, the people, failed to achieve them. As

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the judge and civil rights advocate William H. Hastie put it, “Democracy is a process, not a static condition. It is becoming, rather than being.”

The story of democracy in America is not over, and its unfinished history is our inheritance.

In 1785, George Washington wrote, “Democratical States must always feel before they can see: it is this that makes their Governments slow—but the people will be right at last.”

The dream of equity has always been a nation-building dream, and one we can make real at last. The means of equity have always been governing means. And the ends of equity have always been for everyone, so that all can flourish.

The visionary leaders who came before us plotted a course toward justice, guided by what they knew to be right and necessary, going beyond what others believed was possible at the time. Our generation has followed in their footsteps, but this alone does not do justice to their courage. We honor these leaders by also following their example.

In what follows, we will detail how we must step into the transformative work of our own time: getting our souls right and learning to love all to serve as founders of a new nation that can hold, honor, and nourish each and every one of us.

THE NEXT AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The equity movement has described in painstaking detail the many inequities that haunt the nation. We have modeled the best legislation, policy approaches, and private sector strategies to address them. We have disseminated sophisticated programs and produced elegant narratives and stirring cultural works.

These are the seeds of the world we want to create—but we do not have the soil to plant them in. We are still operating in political, social, and economic systems that fail to acknowledge the fundamental dignity, worthiness, and interconnectedness of all humanity. These seeds cannot grow in a bed of fear, anxiety, and division. They cannot grow where our humanity is truncated by perverse forms of belonging that are founded on vilifying or pathologizing the “other.” And they will not grow in sterile apparatuses of policymaking and governance that remain cut off from the human spirit.

The next American revolution must be a revolution of our collective and individual souls that allows us to grow into the fullness of our personhood and recognize the interconnectedness of all humanity.

Any ideals of justice, no matter the sector, geography, or issue, will ring hollow if they do not center people. And they will remain hollow if the people are not ready, in their souls, to receive and nurture them.

As a nation, we have not yet reckoned with this challenge, and the institutional structures we have inherited are not designed for that purpose. The transformative potential of our best thinking has sometimes languished, ungerminated, while too much of our movement’s power has been funneled into the pursuit of symbolic victories that are disconnected

from real results. We have seen the development of leadership habits that prioritize semantic debates, ideological brand-building, and retreat into the realm of representation and ideas without action or accountability. It is past time to dismantle the Tower of Babel that fetishizes the language and imagery of moral righteousness and to dedicate ourselves to realizing a nation where all can thrive.

To enable the conditions for our collective flourishing, we must get our souls right by mending the connections that have been broken within and between us. This means not merely acknowledging one another but encountering each other deeply and in recognition of our shared state of being. We must accept, as *The Equity Manifesto* (downloadable from our website) makes clear, “that our fates are inextricable.”

Soul work invites us to disengage from symbolic battles, perfectionism, and ideological purity, or what Maurice Mitchell describes as the fallacy of maximalism, which “ignores the fact that the value of any tactic—or the appropriateness of any demand—must be evaluated within a larger strategy grounded in a power analysis.” It summons us to embody a principled consciousness without becoming ideologues so that we can remain clear-eyed about the terrain in which we move.

Soul work requires an ongoing practice of inward and outward reflection, as well as the courage to hold our wounds and faults, and those of other people and communities, with honesty and compassion. It calls us to the intentional creation and expansion of new bonds of solidarity, rooted in respect for the fundamental dignity of personhood. Soul work demands that we resist the pull of rivalry, excavating the ways we have been socialized to view difference as a threat so that we might live into the truth that flourishing is a shared condition, not a finite resource that can be individually enjoyed. Soul work, or honoring and nurturing the fullness of humanity in all, counters isolation and scarcity with connection and abundance.

This work is not for the faint of heart. For too many of us, the muscles required for it are underdeveloped, even atrophied, under the weight of compounding injustices, alienation from one another, disconnection from nature, and the daily struggle to make it through in a world that does not seem to know how to love us. When we’re in survival mode, the tender labor of love may seem like a luxury we can’t afford. But to act out of love for all is how we survive and thrive.

We ignore soul work at our own peril. Humanity is hard-wired for connection and belonging. In the face of uncertainty and fear, the search for safety and meaning assumes even greater urgency. Too often our needs for belonging, community, and fellowship have given rise to exclusionary paradigms and practices that justify serving and caring for some people but not others and a culture of separation and dehumanization. In the face of oppression, trauma, and deprivation, we too easily find “our place” in spaces that affirm our pain by fueling the division and inequities that produced it in the first place. These practices will not simply wither away and cannot be overcome by an equal-but-opposite force, which would

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only reproduce a scarcity mindset and the zero-sum thinking that keeps communities divided and jockeying for position against one another.

We must prime our souls for the transformative work of deep socialization. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey described deep socialization as the way people form a society by learning to participate in associated life. The associations and habituated practices that brought us to this threshold will not get us where we now need to go.

Our organizations and every sector in society must be willing to shoulder the scale and depth of this responsibility. It is the logical consequence of acknowledging the intrinsic value of human life and the immutable dignity of personhood: Yes, we are accountable to and for ourselves, *and* we are accountable to and for each other.

We must pause and ask, *What is needed in this moment to achieve the promise of equity in America? What no longer serves us well that we can choose to let go of?* The answers will be the key to unlocking our individual, institutional, and collective soul-renewal in a rapidly changing world.

WE MUST LOVE, PARTICULARLY

"Adapt or perish," H. G. Wells said, underscoring the imperative to anticipate, understand, and evolve in the face of ever-changing conditions. But it was Howard Thurman who offered an ethical directive to those who sought to serve justice: "Love or perish."

Love or perish. This is the call to action for our time. The challenges we face are not only technical but also adaptive and deeply relational. Overcoming them will require not just analytical thinking but also the self-knowledge that only emerges from honest and sustained introspection, which allows us to repair the connections that oppressive systems have severed within and between us.

What does this mean, in practical terms? Love must be understood as a willful action. Specifically, to love is to act in alignment with the good of another: recognizing the good in them and acting in service of what is good for them.

To love all means to acknowledge the inherent dignity and worth of every person—not abstractly, but concretely—and to act in service of their flourishing. Love is an essential human and social competency, an intentional way of being in relation to ourselves, others, and the world. It grows from seeing others in the fullness of their humanity and acknowledging that our fates are intertwined. We are all connected and interdependent.

Love grounds us in honesty, humility, and self-reflection. It provides a way for us to engage in struggle, not against one another but alongside one another, against the systems and power structures that harm us. As bell hooks explained,

To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this

manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility.

We are often taught we have no control over our "feelings."

Yet most of us accept that we choose our actions, that intention and will inform what we do. We also accept that our actions have consequences. ... If we were constantly remembering that love is as love does, we would not use the word in a manner that devalues and degrades its meaning.

We think of love as an applied approach in two important, interrelated ways. "Applied" means that it must be practiced, operationalized, and put into motion. It also suggests that the act of love must have a specific intention, direction, and aim. Love must be particular: Its transformational potential isn't unlocked as love for "people," an abstract concept, but in love for all persons, embodied and concrete. Thurman wrote, "To speak of love for humanity is meaningless. There is no such thing as humanity. What we call humanity has a name, was born, lives on a street, gets hungry, needs all the particular things that we need."

Rather than an inward turn or retreat from struggle, love is a means to revolutionizing ourselves and our institutions to optimize human flourishing. It requires us to see others in the fullness of their humanity and to risk marrying our own well-being to theirs.

James Baldwin wrote, "To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does, too; and, if I can respect this, both of us can live." This is what it means to love particularly: to hold the full complexity of personhood of each one of us and to grapple with the nuances and tensions this complexity creates. By necessity, then, love does not mean shying away from confrontation and struggle; rather, it is the proper means for them.

To love particularly is the key to fortifying our connections with one another, creating shared meaning, and overcoming the exclusionary forms of "belonging" that undermine equity's potential. Flourishing entails the fullest expression of solidarity, creating the conditions for all to fully participate in defining, envisioning, enacting, and enjoying. It heralds the rise of an all-consciousness as expressed by Malcolm X when he said, "I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole."

"ALL" MUST TRULY MEAN ALL

A commitment to loving and serving everyone means honoring and insisting on the dignity of all, because our collective flourishing depends on the ability of every person to flourish in their own ways. It is an invitation to transcend reductive identities and oversimplified paradigms. "All" does not mean "overall" or "on average." All is not a proxy for whiteness or any other category or norm, but an avatar of wholeness that does not reduce people to any least common denominator. When we say all, we must mean everyone.

A commitment to loving and serving all does not mean denying or minimizing our differences. It demands that we honor the personhood, dignity, and complexity of each of us.

If we are to foster a collective soul that embraces the fundamental dignity, worthiness, and interconnectedness of all humanity—alongside a new political, social, and economic context—we cannot shy away from the idea of all. We need to differentiate between the core truth that we are all equal—in the inherent value and dignity of our being—and the ways in which this idea has been twisted and misused.

We must unapologetically reclaim “all” as an expression of our highest and truest aspirations, moving away from the unrealized potential and weaponization of the term. The notion of the “all” sits at the center of the ideals on which this nation was founded and at the very heart of democracy. But it is easy to see the yawning gap between the Framers’ proclamation of the self-evident truth “that all men are created equal” and the systems of law and governance they designed. For much of our history, “all” has carried an invisible asterisk, denoting the exclusion of individuals and communities from an ever-evolving list of exceptions to the rights, guarantees, and protections that are meant to characterize membership in our national community.

“All” has projected symbolic equality while reinforcing material inequality. It has buttressed power structures by denying that they are structural. These bad-faith invocations of “all”—which have tended to exclude those with the least voice in defining them and the least formal power to change them—served as the building blocks of exploitation, division, and oppression. For this reason, “all” has seemed anathema to the cause of equity, like a curtain we have tried so hard to pull back to reveal and remedy disproportionate harms endured by particular groups of people. Skepticism about the term is not misplaced, given that so many have used “all” to deny the ways in which differences matter, prioritizing some and marginalizing others.

But the problem is not the appeal to the “all.” The problem is the exceptions to it, or, put differently, that “all” hasn’t actually meant everyone. The task before us is to resolve the perpetual tension between the ideal of the “all” and the realities of othering, division, and stratification that plague the nation.

In the spirit of self-reflection, let’s be clear: “All” hasn’t always meant all in our movement, either. At different moments in our history, it has been necessary to lift up particular groups or interests, making visible the invisible structures of oppression to address acute harms and injustices. While those strategies will continue to be necessary, we cannot be so overfocused on the process that we lose sight of the result. We cannot invest so deeply in the parts that we neglect the whole.

We must learn to hold every intersectional interest without retreating into issue and identity silos that short-circuit solidarity and prevent

us from cultivating a unifying vision and a nation renewed through a flourishing democracy. While divisive systems of power have reinforced these silos, we have the choice to reject them. We must not allow them to cloud our ability to clearly see that the aspiration of equity has always been about the all.

The good news is that the shortcomings of previous generations—and ours, for that matter—don’t make the truth any less true. We are all equal in the inherent value and dignity of our being and in our legitimate belonging to the human community, with its attendant rights and obligations.

WE THE PEOPLE ARE THE FOUNDERS

We must take ownership of the nation—with all its faults and all its promise—and take up our power as founders with a revolutionary love for all. It is time to publicly declare whose thriving we work to ensure and who we would deny the opportunity to thrive. A commitment to the flourishing of all is the only logical conclusion to acknowledging the intrinsic value of human life and the inherent dignity of personhood. To recognize our shared humanity is to accept the fundamental responsibilities we bear, not only to honor previous generations but also to serve and care for future ones.

Some will stay the course of working on behalf of Black people, Latino people, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Indigenous people, or communities of color, to ensure that they do not go unseen and unheard. All communities should be organized and activated, and it is good and important work to alleviate suffering, build power, and lift up the voices of those who have been left behind.

But redesigning our systems and structures is a governing challenge. To answer the call of governing in a pluralistic society, we must begin and end with the humanity of everyone as the principle we are willing to lift up but also live into, with trembling if necessary, but always with resolution.

We can both own the nation’s legacy with all its imperfections and try to correct for them. If we do so with humility, we can be free of the paralysis of perfectionism. We will surely fall short, but the mark of a job well done will be the opportunity for future generations to own and correct for our imperfections in turn.

Our part will be to move beyond fixed identity-based models and into the fullest aspiration of equity: an economy, society, and democracy that serve the needs of all.

As the horizon of this journey comes into focus, we remember the wisdom of Audre Lorde and her admonition that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” Be emboldened with the certainty that love for all is a tool untouched by the master, and it is ours for the taking.

Michael McAfee is CEO of PolicyLink.

Abbie Langston is vice president of research at PolicyLink.

We must learn to hold every intersectional interest without retreating into issue and identity silos that short-circuit solidarity and prevent us from cultivating a unifying vision.

THE CALL IS **COMING** FROM INSIDE THE HOUSE

What we ask of our institutions,
systems, and governing structures—
to love all—we must also
ask of ourselves.

BY VANICE DUNN

This moment holds tremendous opportunity for our movement if we are willing to accept its invitation. We can live into new ways of being that have the power to shape a nation that works for all. But these new ways of being do not just require us to apply revolutionary love to the strategies, policies, and practices we rely on as organizations. They require that we live into a revolutionary love with each other. We must interrogate our relationships, partnerships, and ways of being, or we risk missing the opportunity to radically transform our movement.

What if we accepted the challenge to act with a revolutionary love for those with whom we share a common purpose?

What would acting with revolutionary love for one another—in this movement with all our differences, imperfections, and promise—look like? Understanding the present moment means recognizing the need for change. Practically, what does this need for change mean for our engagement and our work? How must we transform ourselves?

NOT MERELY
ACKNOWLEDGING BUT ALSO
ENCOUNTERING

Our collective flourishing requires tending to our hearts and souls, a key to how we relate to one another, and mending connections that have been broken within and between us. This means not merely acknowledging one



another, but also encountering one another deeply and recognizing our shared state of being both in the present and in the future that we will either create together or inherit. We must accept, as *The Equity Manifesto* makes clear, “that our fates are inextricable.”

If we turn inward and toward one another, we can see if there are ways we have experienced or even perpetuated harm. We can see if there are ways we have conceded to inaction for fear of causing harm. We can repair harm and prevent it from happening again. When we act with revolutionary love, we can value one another, not just because of our similarities or despite our differences, but because of what can be learned or achieved through our shared experiences, including those of misalignment and complexity.

We have an opportunity to set expectations for one another that are rooted not in perfection but in a commitment to celebrating each other in all

of our contradictions and embracing the power and possibility of growing an imperfect, broad coalition of people accountable to creating a nation that works for all. Opening the aperture of our alliances—whether that is our understanding of the allies who have a powerful role to play or the kinds of strategies that might move us forward—is not important solely for the sake of inclusion. History has taught us time and again that comfort with learning our way forward, with our diversity of approaches and theories of change, is necessary to arrive at where we are going.

This broad coalition won't be predicated on a collapsing of strategies or beliefs. Instead, it will become a space fueled by the invaluable learning that comes from each organization's unique contributions, as it tests, stumbles, and pulls us toward the future we are working to create. We don't have to agree on a single way forward; we simply need to agree on how we will treat one another on the journey.

FOUNDERS OF OUR MOVEMENT

Our common and unlikely partners, both crucial to realizing a future where all can thrive, are under attack from external and internal forces. Some have even been pushed to the precipice of extinction. These threats mean that we can no longer afford to only acknowledge the ways that the systems around us must change. We must also bring the honesty and forthrightness called for in *The Equity Manifesto* and collectively reject participating in our own demise. In the struggle for the future of our nation, we must choose to become a united force that cannot be denied. This doesn't mean we flatten our differences. Much the opposite, we can embrace the multiplicity of identities that have gotten us to where we are today and that are required to create a more vibrant future.

As Michael McAfee and Abbie Langston write in "A Revolution of the Soul," "The decision before us is whether we stake a claim as rightful cofounders of the nation—the most powerful mantle the equity movement could take up—invoking not just the stewardship of government but also the cocreation of the entire social fabric."

This same invitation lies before us in our own movement. The most powerful choice we can make is whether we stake a claim as the cofounders of our movement, committing to the cocreation of *our* entire social fabric.

How can we begin? We can free our imaginations from cynicism and scarcity, which tell us that we can only defend and we can only hold some and not all. Instead, we can choose to be led by an imagination that sees a nation that honors everyone's humanity and works in service of the thriving of all, as well as the multitude of pathways that can lead us there. In the face of challenges in front of us and between us, we must remain unwavering in our belief that we have the power, individually and collectively, to win and look at our approaches and strategies with possibility rather than suspicion. We must take all these intentions and potential and make real the changes we urgently need. To do so, we must embrace new ways of working together, using accountability to outcomes and material changes in people's lives as our North Star.

We have the power to usher in the next era of our movement, rooted in revolutionary love, honesty, and accountability while accepting and embracing one another in our wholeness and fullness. We can model and shape the nation we envision for all.

Vanice Dunn is vice president of communications at PolicyLink.

THE EVOLUTION OF A MOVEMENT

We envisioned a big tent years ago.
Now, a multiracial movement guided by equity, justice,
and radical imagination stands ready to transform
our democracy to serve all.

BY ANGELA GLOVER BLACKWELL

PolicyLink was founded to realize a vision: Bring the wisdom, voices, experiences, and aspirations of those working for transformative change in local communities into the world of local, state, and federal policy. This ambition required engaging with people pursuing a variety of approaches to change across identities, issues, and geographies to build a massive multiracial movement for equity and justice.

It didn't matter whether you came to the movement as an organizer, public interest lawyer, grassroots leader, philanthropist, community builder, community developer, service provider, or progressive scholar or researcher. Neither did it matter whether your area of focus was education, poverty, transportation, housing, health, economic development, or environmental justice. These approaches and issues are inextricably linked.

It also made no difference whether you came to PolicyLink as part of the Chicano movement, the Black Power movement, or movements for Indigenous communities, youth of color, LGBTQ+ rights, people with disabilities, immigrants, or any marginalized group. Our founding belief, which we have affirmed again and again over the years, is that all people wish to be visible, live in dignity, and exercise their voice and power to shape the future. Identity matters, of course, and the strategies, tactics, framing, and language of these movements vary. Yet at heart, they have all fought to overturn oppressive and exclusionary structures and systems. We have all insisted that this country deliver on the democratic promise that was never fulfilled: liberty, justice, and opportunity for all.

Activists and advocates working in silos and competing for attention and resources have found their power splintered, while leaders face limited capacity to achieve large-scale, sustained change. Imagine what could be accomplished, we thought, if leaders and groups strategized together, joined in transformative solidarity, and harnessed the power of united action.

National equity summits have expressed our founding vision. They have also served as markers of our collective journey toward equity

while representing the evolution of PolicyLink. Each summit illuminates how our movement has grown in numbers, sophistication, power, and ambition. Summits offer forums for setting an agenda for collective action: clarifying goals, strengthening collaborations, and developing language and trust to talk about race and difference openly and honestly so we can move forward together.

PolicyLink was only three years old when we held our first summit in Los Angeles in 2002. Our first major foray onto the national stage was an experiment to see if people working across a spectrum of issues would come to our big tent. We focused on regional equity, framing the quest for fairness and inclusion in the context of geography. In short, when seeking equity, place matters. It turned out that activists in housing, health, food justice, economic development, and other issues not only could see themselves under that banner but also connected with and energized one another while discovering shared goals and opportunities for collaboration.

The theme of the second summit in Philadelphia in 2005 was equitable development. This convening translated the regional equity concept into action and focused on race. How do we center race (understanding past racial injustices and advancing equitable remedies) in the planning, decision-making, and investments that shape a region, whether in housing, transportation, or jobs? This summit put racial equity and equitable development on the national map and in the movement lexicon. It also generated examples and strategies for application.

A few months after the Philadelphia summit, the capacity of equitable development was tested when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. Large influential foundations gathered around the concept of equitable development in an attempt to ensure a just rebuilding. To help inform and guide this effort, PolicyLink opened an office in Louisiana.

In 2008, we held our summit in a city that laid bare, in heartbreaking and infuriating ways, exactly why race and place matter: New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina had shown the world the catastrophic consequences of failed public infrastructure, underinvestment in Black neighborhoods, and the cruel disregard of public officials for the people who lived there.

By this time, PolicyLink had worked in the city for three years as it struggled to recover. That effort spurred us to expand our work into infrastructure. We asked: Who decides how the nation spends billions of dollars each year on water systems, transportation systems, climate mitigation, green spaces, housing, and everything else in the built environment? Who benefits from projects that support community resilience and thriving local economies? Who gets the jobs these projects create? For the first time, PolicyLink took aim at transforming not simply an issue, but also how entire fields operated.

These insights and challenges allowed us, in partnership with other groups working in the Gulf, to frame

the 2008 New Orleans summit around infrastructure equity. The summit ended with a call and an agenda for infrastructure policy guided by participatory democracy and accountability for producing shared prosperity that benefits everyone, especially communities harmed and made vulnerable by racist policies and disinvestment.

The scale of public and private spending on infrastructure got us thinking more deeply about our economy. At our 2011 summit in Detroit, we presented a new frame: equity as an economic imperative. We argued that for an increasingly diverse nation seeking new paths to prosperity in a globalized world, equity is not only a moral call—the good, right thing to do—but also the superior growth model. Our research as well as work by others have demonstrated that inequity is a drag on our economy. (In 2019 alone, racial gaps in income and wealth cost the nation \$3 trillion.)



Some of our friends and partners were skeptical about stretching the rationale for equity to the marketplace or tying equity to growth at a time when climate change and environmental degradation demanded an end to unrestrained growth. Yet we believed that equity as an economic imperative aligned with the imperative to protect the planet, and within a few short years, this dual agenda inspired and supported innovative strategies and important policy changes.

For example, private-public partnerships leveraged investments in affordable housing, grocery stores, green infrastructure, and resources for health and opportunity in disinvested neighborhoods around the country. Across the political spectrum, leaders in cities and states began raising their minimum wage, often with strong support from voters and business leaders. Organizing by coalitions of labor, community, and faith groups led to expanded workforce development, higher wages, stronger job protections, and safer working conditions in a range of industries and locales, from home-care workers in Washington state to construction workers in Texas and school food-service workers in Los Angeles.

Not only did such victories offer new models for creating an economy that works for everyone, but also they revealed two truths that would guide and expand the equity movement. First, equitable growth does not mean runaway development but a path to sustainability and healthy, robust communities.

Second, equity is not a zero-sum game that benefits one group at the expense of another. In targeting investments to the people and places that need them most, we strengthen and enrich our society. PolicyLink called this the curb-cut effect, underscoring the fact that equity is about creating a good life for all.

We reaffirmed these ideas at the 2015 summit in Los Angeles with the announcement of All-In Cities. This PolicyLink initiative seized on the resurgence of US cities and their potential for innovation using a framework and policy agenda aimed at ensuring a fully inclusive urban comeback that nurtured the talents and tapped the skills of everyone, especially low-income people and people of color who had lived in cities through their long decline.

By that time, our networks were far from the only ones talking about equity. The nation had elected the most diverse political leaders in history at all levels of government, a dramatic indication of the power of an emerging people-of-color majority. Companies, municipal agencies, old-line NGOs—everyone, it seemed—introduced “DEI” initiatives. While we celebrated this progress, we recognized that diverse representation in politics, business, and civil society is critical but not sufficient for driving the transformative change needed to create an equitable future. The concept of equity had become so ubiquitous that it risked losing all meaning.

That’s why we released *The Equity Manifesto* at the 2015 Los Angeles summit. It reasserted the definition of equity—just and fair inclusion into a society in which everyone can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential—and defined the underlying values of a multiracial movement

with the aim of unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all.

The Chicago 2018 summit found the country in a decidedly different political environment. Hard-won civil rights, fundamental democratic values, and the very notion of equity had come under assault. Leaders at the highest echelons of the federal government seethed with overt racial animus. Rather than retrench, PolicyLink embraced radical imagination and issued our most audacious, far-reaching declaration yet.

We called the summit “Our Power. Our Future. Our Nation.” This was our way of saying that we were no longer asking for a seat at the table. Instead, we *were* the table. The equity movement had grown to include a huge cohort of leaders from every sector imaginable, including government, business, media, the arts, technology, big philanthropy, and legions of nonprofits. It cuts across race, ethnicity, gender, generation, religion, ability, and every other line that is used to divide and disempower us. Together, we intend to create a new nation that finally fulfills the ideals and promises spelled out in the country’s founding documents.

It was also at this summit, following 20 years at the helm of PolicyLink, that I announced I would step into a new PolicyLink role of founder-in-residence, and Michael McAfee would become CEO.

Six years have passed since then. We endured COVID-19. An insurrection at the US Capitol. Supreme Court decisions that have set back human rights and freedoms by a half century. We have discovered just how fragile our democracy is.

The equity movement faces furious pushback. As victories are ripped away and issues of fairness and justice we thought were settled have come under vicious attack, the trust and partnerships we have built over the years will be tested. Together, we must hold on to everything we’ve learned, stick to our ground, and keep pushing forward. This perilous moment affirms what the movement has said all along: A threat to the most vulnerable is a threat to all.

It is at this moment that we gather in Atlanta for a summit called, “A Revolution of the Soul.” Understanding the headwinds that we face, we must drive toward creating a radically inclusive multiracial democracy that centers the humanity and dignity of us all. Together, movement partners can reflect on the individual and collective work needed to deliver on the ultimate aspiration of equity: building a nation where everyone can thrive.

We know that the big tent we envisioned years ago is precisely what the nation needs at this historic juncture. Thanks to the work of thousands of organizations and institutions and millions of constituents, an intersectional movement, guided by radical imagination and working in the spirit of generosity, stands ready to not only protect our democracy but also transform it to serve human flourishing for all.

Angela Glover Blackwell is the founder-in-residence of PolicyLink and host of the Reimagining Democracy for a Good Life and Radical Imagination podcasts.

Understanding the headwinds that we face, we must drive toward creating a radically inclusive multiracial democracy that centers the humanity and dignity of us all.

THE Invitation

The unfulfilled promise for “We the People” in our founding documents is an invitation we must seize.

BY POLICYLINK

Almost 250 years ago, this nation was founded under the revolutionary idea that all are created equal. The Constitution that followed this Declaration of Independence offered us the invitation to bring this idea to life under the mantle of “We, the People.” It is now the work of our generation to take up the unfulfilled promise of “We, the People” and refound a country that truly serves all.

This is the invitation before us. This moment calls upon us to assume our role as founders of a true multiracial democracy and to remake the nation so all can flourish.

What exactly does that require us to commit to?

We must envision and build a shared future so expansive and uncompromising that it becomes irresistible. We imagine a nation where a person’s race or zip code does not predict their life outcomes—where no one is expected to experience violence, poverty, hunger, or privation. We envision a nation in service of our collective flourishing, where everyone can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. A country that finally works for all.

We can’t create this vision of collective flourishing if we aren’t aiming for it. This future is ours to create, and one important step is to reclaim “all” as an expression of our highest aspirations. “All” does not mean “overall” or “on average.” “All” is not a proxy for whiteness or any other category or norm, and it does not mean denying or minimizing our differences. Taking responsibility for all is an invitation to transcend reductive identities and oversimplified paradigms. It is an avatar of wholeness that does not reduce people to any least common denominator. It demands that we honor the personhood, dignity, and complexity of each of us. When we say “all,” we must mean everyone.

The ends of equity have always been the transformation of our society—our laws, regulations, customs, institutions, and ways of relating to one another—so that everyone can flourish. But throughout history, bad-faith invocations of “all”—which have often excluded those with the least voice in defining them and the least formal power to change them—have served as the building blocks of exploitation, division, and oppression. The term “all” has

been used to project symbolic equality while reinforcing material inequality. Skepticism is understandable when “all” has been used to deny the ways in which differences matter while surreptitiously prioritizing some and marginalizing others. But even in these cases, the problem is not the appeal to the “all.” The problem is that “all” hasn’t actually meant everyone.

We must occupy the highest ground, spiritually and politically, by fortifying ourselves to be ready to govern in a nation where all truly means all. By holding all intersectional interests and refusing to be pushed into silos that short-circuit solidarity, we can cultivate and advance a unifying vision and a nation renewed through a flourishing democracy.

This work is not easy, and it is not possible in the absence of a revolution of the soul. If we are to recalibrate our systems, structures, and norms for the flourishing of all people, we must develop an individual and collective soul that can love all. This work can only be realized if we grow into the fullness of our personhood and recognize the interconnectedness of all humanity.

We must take ownership of the nation, with all its faults and promise, and take up our power as founders with a revolutionary love for all. Our part will be to move beyond fixed identity-based models and into the fullest aspiration of equity: a democracy, economy, and society that serve the needs of all.

It is time to publicly declare whose thriving we work to ensure and who we would deny the opportunity to thrive. A commitment to the flourishing of all is the only logical conclusion to acknowledging the intrinsic value of human life and the inherent dignity of personhood.

How will we know if we are making the evolutionary leap to building social, cultural, and governing systems that work in service of human flourishing? We mentioned a future where a person’s race or zip code does not predict their life outcomes—a nation where no one is expected to experience violence, poverty, hunger, or privation. One way we will know we have arrived is that there will no longer be 100 million people living in or near poverty. Instead, we will see 330 million people flourishing. That day, we will see what it looks like to unlock the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in *all*.

PolicyLink

is a national research
and action institute
committed to building a future
where all people in America
participate in a flourishing
multiracial democracy,
prosper in an equitable economy,
and live in thriving
communities of opportunity.
www.policylink.org

The logo consists of the word "PolicyLink" in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid gray square.