



## Safe Havens & Social Change

When facing oppression, you need a safe supportive community from which to build your life

In February of 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man was pursued by three White men and killed for jogging in what was considered a White neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia. The killers were finally convicted in January of this year. They were convicted because the incident was caught on video by one of the three men. You can only imagine all the other such encounters that are not videotaped. Such instances are indicative of the unknown dangers faced by those, too often people of color, that some in the dominant society have for centuries deemed as threats.

Ashley Scott, a realtor from Stonecrest, Ga., was driven to seek therapy by her reaction to the shooting death of Ahmaud. After several sessions she realized that her problem was 400 years of racial oppression. With her friend Renee Walters, an entrepreneur and investor, they founded the Freedom Georgia Initiative, which brought together 19 Black families who collectively purchased 96.71 acres of rural land in central Georgia. Much like the all-Black townships formed by former slaves starting in the 1700's, Ashley and Renee were building Freedom, Georgia so that there was a safe place "for our people to just come and breathe."

*"It's now time for us to get our friends and family together and build for ourselves," said Walters, who serves as the president of the organization, in an interview with Yahoo News. "That's the only way we'll be safe. And that's the only way that this will work. We have to start bringing each other together."*

There are an endless array of efforts that everyday people make to change their lives and the lives of their friends and colleagues. But developing a safe haven from which to contend with the racism, obstruction, and oppression that many face is a needed foundation. I have previously written about my Mexican mother encountering a Mexican panhandler and lecturing him that to change

his life he had to reconcile with family and friends. That to rebuild his life he needed a community of family and friends to support his journey. And so it is for everyone that a safe place, a safe, supportive community is a foundation for social change.

Historically you will find that when large numbers of everyday people have made social and economic progress they were part of a community that shared and provided mutual support. In an ecosystem where there is safety built on the strength of mutual support, not only are the chances for success better but that safe haven attracts others to join or build their own safe harbor. In the psychology of safety, Dr. Nance Gahles writes:

*“The emotions associated with feeling safe begin in utero and follows us throughout our lives. The element of safety allows us to take risks. Conscious choices, where we evaluate the risk and the reward, lead to stable, mature mental and emotional development and opportunities for creativity. When developed properly, sense of safety becomes an inner state of security and well-being, and allows for pursuit of relationships, bonding, and receiving or sharing attributes that create happiness.”*

When people come together on their own, when they self-organize, that network becomes a safe haven community. My colleagues in the social sector now need to recognize that people self-organize every day informally. Those that want to help must accept those self-organized efforts as a starting point and then as outsiders support those efforts as people work on their vision of life, not our vision based on theories of change. Encouraging and supporting people to get together with friends, to take on projects together, to lead their own change, is a core part of Peer-driven Change, PDC, that I have been discussing in my writings. There are everyday changemakers everywhere!

We instinctively know about the need for safe haven in raising our kids, giving them a secure environment so they can develop naturally. The safe harbor of family and community is not just about avoiding violence. As Dr. Gahles explained, *“The element of safety allows us to take risks”*. It is a *pre-requisite* for positive change, for having the space to evaluate and be creative especially for those feeling oppressed. Everyday people can be supported to organize their own communities which can endure if they are not attacked or burned down like the all-Black townships were.

Having a place or a group of people where you feel safe is essential. Try to imagine how it feels to be in a world that looks down on you, has power over you, or makes you feel that you are less than them. Getting charity only adds to being diminished. When you are "giving people a hand out" (even cash) or

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change the language to "giving a hand up" you are immediately placing yourself above them. People need to do it themselves and of course they need their friends and family. The stereotype that "they" cannot do it is wrong as entire communities have proven in history.

That feeling of being seen as less is bolstered by the growing gap in wealth and social standing. Growing up in poor neighborhoods, at first I thought rich people were just smarter than us. But now I have come to realize that most of those I grew up with were just as smart and talented as the rich folks. I still remember questioning my capabilities as we internalized the outsiders message that somehow it was our fault, our family's fault, that we were poor.

Those at the bottom of the economic pyramid are viewed as charity cases, unable to help themselves. They are considered takers rather than makers in society which emboldens the racists and White supremist. At times those at the bottom face overt threatening acts and violence. At other times that disparagement comes across when they are treated like a child with small handout, paternalism or pity.

We have been building a separate and unequal system of programs and supports that we wouldn't put our own families through. What my mother wanted was to be included as an equal in the systems enjoyed by the privileged. She knew she was anyone's equal. There is no safe haven in a paternalistic environment. Slaves did not feel that the plantation was a safe haven just because their master fed and clothed them. It is difficult to be your best if you are either attacked or are patronized.

\* As noted in a previous posting, the evolution of my work from the Family Independence Initiative, FII, is *not* reflected by the agency 'Up Together' even if they use some of the same language and searches for FII are still linked to that group.