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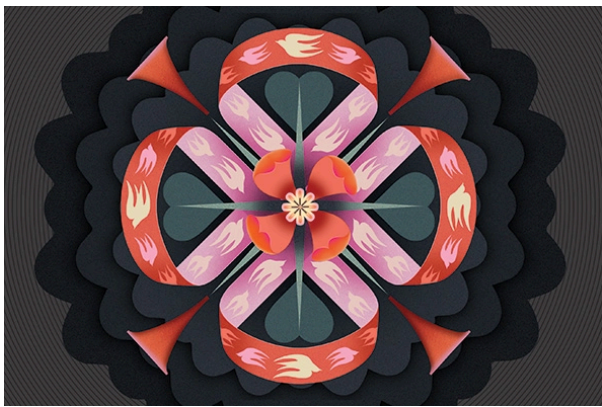
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Human Rights

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** | Fall 2024



(Illustration by Vicki Turner)

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.

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. *Sponsored by PolicyLink*

The Power of the South: Welcome to Atlanta

Our Journey to a Consciousness of All



A Revolution of the Soul

The Call Is Coming From Inside the House

The Evolution of a Movement

The Invitation

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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 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.

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.

“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.

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*Read more stories by **Michael McAfee** & **Abbie Langston**.*

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