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Saying Goodbye to 2018's Seesaw of Outrage and Numbness



Deepa Iyer Dec 30, 2018 · 6 min read

All year long, I have been on a seesaw of outrage and numbness. The deaths of children in government custody. The Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. The family separation policy. The rollbacks to protections of queer and trans communities. The crackdown on accessing food stamps. These are just a few of the ways in which the Trump Administration threatened the rights, bodies, psyches, and livelihoods of people in 2018.

I saw a lot of you on similar seesaws out there. Many of us are either directly affected by or are close to someone experiencing the Administration's relentless attacks. Still others of us are worn down, disoriented, and numb. It's not surprising. During the first two years of the Trump presidency, people of conscience have been caught in a push and pull cycle that has demanded struggle at every turn. There have been no ebbs or flows, and no collective sighs of relief — because once we evaded the disaster at one blockade, we had to confront a siege somewhere else.

Sustaining high levels of outrage, constant vigilance, and short-term cycles of rapid response is unrealistic and unhealthy for us as individuals and community members, and as organizations and movements. At the same time, becoming numb, accepting what is happening as the new normal or relying on spurts of self-care are not long-term options either.

How do we get off the seesaw? How can we practice principled actions under grim circumstances? How can 2019 be a year of both risk-taking and

visioning?

In our lives and as part of movements and organizations, many of us play different roles in pursuit of equity, liberation, inclusion, and justice.



Some of us are **frontline responders** who quickly and ably transition into rapid-response mode instinctively and organize resources, networks, and messages.

Some of us are **healers** who tend to the intergenerational trauma of racism, colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and nativism.

Some of us are community **storytellers** and **artists**, binding the past and the present, channeling the histories and experiences of our ancestors to shed light on what is possible today.

Some of us are natural **bridge builders** who can work across divisions with patience and compassion.

Some of us are proud **disruptors** who speak up and take action — especially when it is uncomfortable and risky.

And some of us are **visionaries**, with the ability to find, articulate, and reconnect us to our north star, even when we cannot clearly see the sky.

Not all of us can (or should) play each of these roles; an effective movement ecosystem requires different actors to play these roles. We might also find ourselves falling into different roles depending on personal and external circumstances. Or, we might be observers and supporters from the side from time to time.

Here are some **guiding questions** to use the image above to reflect on your own social change journey for 2019:

- What role(s) do I feel comfortable playing? What role(s) did I try out in 2018 and what lessons did I learn?
- How can I stretch myself in 2019, and why? What are the injustices that keep me up at night, outrage me, and push me to act?
- What do I need to learn more about before I step in? Who can teach me how to do that?
- Where can I take bolder risks, especially if I hold different forms of privilege? What support systems do I need to be able to take those risks?
- If I work in or adjacent to the non-profit and movement ecosystem, how am I holding onto purpose, especially given the pulls and contradictions of **purity** (having to prove that we belong in movement spaces), **productivity** (maintaining constant performance and output at the cost of overwork, replication, and low impact), **personality** (pursuing relevance and celebrity activism), and **perfectionism** (expecting to get it right all the time and being afraid to own up to mistakes)?
- Who are the people I surround myself with and what roles do they play? How can they hold me accountable in a compassionate way? How can I

Top highlight

widen this community?

- When (and not if) I make mistakes, how do I acknowledge them and course correct without feeling like I've failed?
- How do I move through different roles without feeling like I have to pick just one in order to be effective? At the same time, how can I make sure that I'm not a wanderer or a short-term amateur? Or positioning myself as an expert within a silo?

What other roles do people and organizations play? What questions are part of your movement practice? Please feel free to add them in the comments.

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In 2018, I found **inspiration** from people and organizations who played various roles in seeking justice for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Here are a few examples:

- **Disruptors:** Remember Theresa Patricia Okoumou, a Black immigrant woman, who climbed the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty on July 4th to protest the family separation policy? Her act of civil disobedience disrupted the mythology of the American dream. Also in 2018, activists and journalists exposed the corporations that benefit from policies like the Muslim ban and for-profit prisons such as GEO Group and CoreCivic that have multi-million contracts from the Department of Homeland Security. Asian American activists disrupted the good versus bad immigrant narrative by reminding us that Southeast Asian immigrants being deported with criminal histories also deserve due process and justice.



Therese Patricia Okoumou scales the Statue of Liberty to protest immigrant policies (New York Daily News).
<https://twitter.com/nydailynews/status/1014674027682631680>

- **Storytellers:** During a pilgrimage to Tule Lake (a segregation center created by the US government during World War II to incarcerate “disloyal” Japanese Americans), Japanese Americans engaged in a powerful solidarity action to denounce the family separation policy which parallels the impact of incarceration.
- **Bridge Builders:** What does meaningful solidarity look like? The Tohono O’odham Nation reminded us of the deep linkages between family and tribal members in Mexico and Southern Arizona. On International Human Rights Day, Muslim faith leaders and activists connected the injustices of the Muslim ban and the asylum ban, building bridges between Latinx and Muslim communities. Groups like the Black Alliance for Just Immigration make it clear that immigration is a racial justice issue, while LGBTQ activists and groups use an intersectionality lens to fight for justice for queer and trans immigrants in jails and at the border.
- **Frontline Responders:** In 2018, churches served as sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants and health professionals and lawyers attended to the needs of people seeking refuge at the border and in immigrant jails. Cities like Atlanta canceled contracts with ICE thanks to the long-term advocacy of community-based organizations, and created funds for deportation defense.

- **Healers:** People opened their homes to immigrant children separated from their families, organizations fulfilled the wishlists of new refugees in the United States, children learned about immigrants through stories and coloring books, and a wide range of communities including a San Diego group of drag queens raised funds for asylum-seekers.
- **Visionaries:** Mijente, a movement building organization, imagined a vision for immigrants well beyond the Trump era. People like Ravi Ragbir, Jean Montreuil, Maru Mora Villalpando, immigrant rights activists who have been targeted by the Trump Administration, still spoke out. Young undocumented people like Jonathan Jayes-Green of the UndocuBlack Network took tremendous risks in sharing their stories and leading organizations. They provide us with a clear vision for what our communities could look like, now and into the future.

Thank you for reading, reflecting, and building towards a more just and more peaceful 2019. Please let me know if you used the image and questions in your own 2018 reflections and 2019 planning. Follow me here and on Twitter @dviyer.

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