I don't have time to write this essay. I can't speak for everyone else managing to sneak in a submission before the (extended) deadline of this contest, but I have a feeling that I'm not alone in this regard. Even before the pandemic hit last year, the majority of our society was overworked, underpaid, and thinly-stretched between a slew of unnecessarily conflicting priorities like jobs, families, health, and education. Covid-19 alone did not cause the storm of loss and devastation that humanity continues to weather some 14 months after it was declared a pandemic— it simply highlighted the harmful nature and glaring weaknesses in our current system that have existed since its inception. Just so we're clear, I'm talking about capitalism. Capitalism and white supremacy and neoliberalism and all of these other entangled systems of oppression that work in tandem to make most folks' lives more painful, more isolated, less wondrous. Our response to Covid has been so disastrously insufficient due largely to an unwillingness to even consider radical structural change as a possible solution. A response to Covid that veered away from individualistic, capitalist ideals and deprioritized the market in favor of actual human life would have run the risk of calling into question the justification of all this routine struggle. If the powers that be had leaned into the reality that there is, in fact, enough to go around, they might never have been able to racast the spell that has so many people convinced otherwise.

Structural change requires a redistribution of power, a tolerance for discomfort, and an actual understanding of why the change is important. We can't jump directly to structural change through a single election or a few new policies— we have to lay the groundwork, shift perspective, and center the people that these changes impact most significantly. I've seen Audre Lorde's words echoed with frequency this past year— "for 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" (Lorde 1984). This isn't a matter of giving the leaders of our institutions a handbook on how to not be oppressive. In order to better our society in significant, lasting ways, we need to completely transform those institutions and in many cases dismantle them altogether. This is no small undertaking. For those of us that the current system privileges in various ways, the idea of giving up our conveniences and advantages for some imagined unknown future can be a hard sell. There is comfort to be found in the familiar, even if that familiar is objectively flawed. Prentis Hempill, a healing justice activist and practitioner, explains that "there are risks ahead in our resistance and in our organizing, but the more we risk in our practice of healing justice, the stronger our ground becomes and the more defined our vision" (Hempill 2017). In order to build something better, we have to embrace the inherent risk that comes with trying something new.

To zero-in on a concrete example of how we can create structural change in our community, we can start from where we are currently and reexamine and address the oppressive systems that we are perpetuating here at Portland State University. As a first year MSW student, I'm in the process of paying tens of thousands of dollars to learn about all the ways that capitalism has failed us, all while contributing to the commodification and professionalization of care work. Applying for scholarship after scholarship in an ill-fated attempt to fund an education in how capitalism harms society is a woefully ironic exercise. My cohort and I spend hours-long zoom classes critiquing oppressive ideologies and discussing their impact, then log-off and re-find our assigned positions in the very same systems of harm that we're being taught to challenge. Our current system reinforces oppressive power and class dynamics, and results in homogenous cohorts mostly made up of people that are already skilled at navigating an

oppressive system. Our approach to education requires students to actively participate in the same systems of oppression that we hope to one day dismantle, and leaves out the voices of the very people that we should be uplifting. I recognize that one university alone can not simply elect to abolish inequity in the Academy overnight, but I believe that there's room to get creative and leverage even limited resources in imaginative ways. What would it take to build a community focused on transparency, creative problem-solving, and communication, that's primary goal was to serve its members? What if we as a space of learning focused on educating folks on how to act as agents of positive change in the world at large without instilling in them ideas of perfectionism and exceptionalism, and without saddling them with debt?

To genuinely call for structural change means to embrace the ideas of transformative justice and abolition. I believe that it is not a reformist approach, but an abolitionist approach that will lead us to a truly just and liberated future. Systems put in place to control, punish, and exploit can not be incrementally tweaked into something equitable. Mariame Kaba explains that abolition is about imagination and about building a vision of a restructured world (Kaba 2020). Abolition does not focus only on throwing out our current systems, but on envisioning the alternatives that should replace them. When describing transformative justice, Mia Mingus emphasizes that it "is not simply the absence of the state and violence, but the presence of the values, practices, relationships and world that we want. It is not only identifying what we don't want, but proactively practicing and putting in place things we want" (Mingus 2019).

Instead of only focusing on giving folks the tools they need to navigate an admittedly challenging world, I'm interested in questioning the value and necessity of those challenges. I believe wholeheartedly in working hard and embracing discomfort, but only when it moves us toward something better. I want to eliminate unnecessary struggle. I don't believe in the hustle. I

can respect a solid work ethic but I don't think we should wear our sleepless nights and jam-packed schedules like a badge of honor. When someone asks me how I'm doing, I want to be able to respond with something more generative and worthwhile than "busy." I don't know exactly how to abolish capitalism, but I know it involves rest and mutual-aid. I know that it involves lifting up the countless people that are already working this slow magic in a less professionalized fashion, learning from them, sharing our resources, and letting our collective needs and imaginations lead the way.

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